

# B IN THE BEGINNING

A NEW ENGLISH  
RENDITION  
OF THE BOOK OF  
GENESIS

Translated with  
Commentary and Notes by  
EVERETT FOX

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This new English rendition of the Book of Genesis, the first volume in a new translation of the Pentateuch by Everett Fox, presents a unique approach to the art of biblical translation.

Unlike idiomatic or simply literal translations, this English rendition of Genesis seeks to restore the spoken character of the Hebrew Bible. Fox's translation departs from the standard usage of most biblical translators whose goal is to render the meaning of the text in clear, idiomatic English for contemporary readers. What is lost in these translations is the repetition of the key words and word-stems that form the echoes, allusions, and powerful inner structures of sound that the text uses to develop its central themes.

Based on principles developed by Buber and Rosenzweig when they translated the Hebrew Bible into German, *In the Beginning* reproduces in English the unique literary forms, linguistic features and, wherever possible, the rhythm of the original Hebrew. Verses are printed in cola or "breath units" resembling free verse, so that they

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of the Book of Genesis

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Everett Fox

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*Dedicated to*  
NAHUM N. GLATZER  
*on the occasion of*  
*his eightieth birthday*

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בן שמונים לגבורה



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# TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

. . . read the Hebrew Bible as though it were something entirely unfamiliar, as though it had not been set before you ready-made. . . . Face the Book with a new attitude as something new. . . . Let whatever may happen occur between yourself and it. You do not know which of its sayings and images will overwhelm you and mold you. . . . But hold yourself open. Do not believe anything a priori; do not disbelieve anything a priori. Read aloud the words written in the book in front of you; hear the word you utter and let it reach you.

—adapted from a lecture of Martin Buber, 1926

## I

THIS TRANSLATION is guided by the principle that the Hebrew Bible originated largely as a spoken literature, and that consequently it must be translated with careful attention to rhythm and sound. The translation tries to reflect the particular rhetoric of the Hebrew wherever possible, preserving such devices as repetition, allusion, alliteration, and word-play. It is therefore intended to echo the Hebrew, and when read aloud, to lead the reader back to the sound structure and form of the original.

Such an approach was first espoused by Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig in their monumental German translation of the Bible (1925–1961) and in subsequent interpretive essays. *In the Beginning* is in many respects an offshoot of the Buber-Rosenzweig work (hereafter abbreviated as B-R), and can trace its basic principles, its general layout of the text, and many specific readings to its influence. If at the same time I have made numerous departures from B-R, it has been with an eye toward greater faithfulness to the Hebrew, as it is understood by contemporary scholarship.

The idea that the Bible has oral roots has long been acknowledged by scholars. On the other hand there has been little agreement on exactly how those roots manifest themselves in the text. One cannot suggest that the Bible is a classic work of oral literature in the same sense as the *Iliad* or *Beowulf*. It does not employ regular meter or rhyme, even in sections

that are clearly formal poetry. The text of the Bible that we possess is most likely a mixture of oral and written material from a variety of sources and periods, and recovering anything resembling original oral forms would seem to be impossible. This is particularly true given the considerable chronological and cultural distance at which we stand from the text, which does not allow us to know how it was performed in its own time.

Nevertheless the nature of the Bible's style points unmistakably to spoken origins, and this fact is crucial for interpretation and translation. The rhetoric of the text is such that many passages and sections are fully understandable only when they are analyzed in their "oral" form—as *they are heard*. Using echoes, allusions, and powerful inner structures of sound, the text is often able to convey ideas in a manner that mere vocabulary cannot do. A few illustrations may suffice to introduce this phenomenon to the reader; he will encounter it constantly throughout this volume.

A noteworthy example of the importance of the oral quality of the biblical text occurs in one of the climactic sequences in Genesis, Chapters 32–33. Jacob, the central figure of the narrative, has not seen his brother Esau in twenty years. Now a successful and prosperous adult, on his way back to Canaan, he sends messengers to his brother to forestall Esau's vengeance for Jacob's misdeeds of twenty years earlier—namely, the theft of the birthright and blessing which Esau felt were rightly his. When Jacob finds out that Esau "is already coming . . . and four hundred men are with him" (v.7), he goes even further, preparing an elaborate gift for his brother in the hopes of appeasing his anger. The text in verses 21–22 presents Jacob's thoughts and actions (as translated in the *New English Bible*):

for he thought, "I will appease him with the present that I have sent on ahead, and afterwards, when I come into his presence, he will perhaps receive me kindly." So Jacob's present went on ahead of him. . . .

This is an accurate though highly idiomatic translation of the Hebrew, and the reader will notice nothing unusual about the passage. The sound of the Hebrew here, on the other hand, gives one pause. It is built on variations of the word *panim*, whose basic meaning is "face," although the Hebrew uses it idiomatically to encompass various ideas. (Note: In Hebrew, *p* is pronounced *ph* under certain conditions.) If the text is translated on the basis of sound, its oral character, and something quite remarkable, emerge (*italics mine*):

For he said to himself:  
 I will wipe (the anger from) his *face* (*phanav*)  
 with the gift that goes ahead of my *face*; (*le-phanai*)  
 afterward, when I see his *face*, (*phanav*)  
 perhaps he will lift up my *face*! (*phanai*)  
 The gift crossed over ahead of his *face*. . . . (*al panav*)

Comparison of these two English versions is instructive. In the *New English Bible*, as in most other contemporary versions, the translators are apparently concerned with presenting the text in clear, modern, idiomatic English. For example, they render the Hebrew *yissa phanai* as "receive me kindly." The N.E.B. translates the *idea* of the text; at the same time it translates *out* the sound by not picking up on the repetition of *panim* words.

What does the reader gain by hearing the literalness of the Hebrew? And what is lost by the use of its idiomatic meaning? As mirrored in the second translation, it is clear that our text is signaling something of significance. The motif of "face" (which might be interpreted as "facing" or "confrontation") occurs at crucial points in the story. The night before his fateful meeting with Esau, as he is left to ponder the next day's events, Jacob wrestles with a mysterious stranger—a divine being. After Jacob's victory, the text reports (32:31):

Yaakov called the name of the place: Peniel/*Face of God*,  
 for: I have seen God,  
*face to face*,  
 and my life has been saved.

The repetition suggests a thematic link with what has gone before. One could interpret that once the hero has met and actually bested this divine being, his coming human confrontation is assured of success. Thus upon meeting Esau at last, Jacob says to him (33:10):

For I have, after all, seen your *face*, as one sees the *face* of God,  
 and you have been gracious to me.

It could be said that in a psychological sense the meetings with divine and human adversaries are a unity, the representation of one human process in two narrative episodes. This is accomplished by the repetition of the word *panim* in the text.

The above interpretation depends entirely on sound. Once that focus is dropped, either through the silent reading of the text or a standard translation, the inner connections are simply lost and the reader is

robbed of the opportunity to make these connections for himself. Clearly there is a difference between translating what the text means and translating what it says.

While the Jacob passages use the sound of a specific word to indicate an important motif in the narrative, there are other cases where sound brings out structure, and the structure itself conveys the principal idea of the passage. A striking example of this is found at the beginning of Genesis. God's first acts of creation in 1:3–5 are portrayed in a highly ordered fashion, suggesting that creation itself is orderly, and this idea is the thematic backbone of the whole chapter. We are meant to experience the orderliness of God's activity through the sensuality of the language and through the particular way in which the text speaks:

God said: Let there be light! And there was light.  
 God saw the light: that it was good.  
 God separated the light from the darkness.  
 God called the light: Day! and the darkness he called: Night!

The four occurrences of "God" plus verb accomplish the narrator's goal, and give a tone to the creation account that makes it akin to poetry. In contrast, virtually all modern translations treat the passage as prose, rendering it into clear written English but simultaneously removing its inner structure. What remains is a statement of what is taking place in the narrative, but without its underlying thrust. Again the *New English Bible*:

God said, "Let there be light," and there was light; and God saw that the light was good, and he separated light from darkness. He called the light day, and the darkness night.

This translation is cast in good English style. For just that reason two occurrences of "God" have been omitted, and the passage consequently reads smoothly—so smoothly that one glides past it as if creation were the same as any other narrated action. But what has been lost is the characteristic oral ring of the text, and with it, its intent to say something beyond the content of words.

Once the spokenness of the Bible is understood as a critical factor in the translation process, a number of practical steps become necessary which constitute radical changes from past translation practices. Buber and Rosenzweig introduced three such major innovations: the form in

which the text is printed, the reproduction of biblical names and their meanings, and the utilization of the "leading-word" technique, by means of which important repetitions in the Hebrew are retained in translation. These innovations have largely been followed in *In the Beginning*. Some further explanations will facilitate the reader's encounter with this text.

First, the translated text is printed in lines rather than in paragraphs. These lines, known as "cola," are based on natural spoken phrasing, with each representing a unit of breathing. Each one similarly represents a unit of meaning, thus illustrating the principle that form and content are inseparable in the Bible. Division of the text into cola facilitates its reading aloud and makes it possible for the listener to feel its inner rhythm. Only at that point can the text begin to deliver its message with full clarity and force. A case in point is the concluding passage of the creation story, Gen. 2:1-3. Rendered in cola, the text emerges as a tightly constructed poem, whose rhythm and repetitions provide a fitting summary for the majestic account of creation:

Thus were finished the heavens and the earth, with all of their array.  
God had finished, on the seventh day, his work that he had made,  
and then he ceased, on the seventh day, from all his work that he had  
made.

God gave the seventh day his blessing, and he hallowed it,  
for on it he ceased from all his work, which by creating, God had made.

Cola do not correspond to the traditional verse divisions in Jewish and Christian Bibles. Those divisions are of late origin (perhaps from the ninth century in written form), and were adopted for the sake of reference. Instead, cola arise from the experience of reading the Hebrew text aloud and of feeling its spoken rhythms. The specific divisions are somewhat arbitrary, in that each reader will hear the text differently. What is important, however, is that this practice in general points away from the concept of the Bible as a written book and restores the sense of it as a spoken performance.

Second, personal and place names generally appear in Hebrew forms throughout this translation. Thus, for example, the Hebrew *Moshe* is retained instead of Moses, *Kayin* instead of Cain, and *Rivka* instead of Rebecca. This practice stems from the central role that names play in biblical stories. In biblical Israel as throughout the ancient world, names are often meant to give clues about the bearer's personality or fate. The meaning of a name is often explained outright in the text itself. In *In the*

*Beginning* this is represented by a slash in the text, as in the following example (Gen. 30:23–24):

She said:  
 God has removed/*asaf*  
 my reproach.  
 And she called his name: Yosef,  
 saying:  
 May YHWH add/*yosef*  
 another son to me.

The name here is a play on words, hinting at Joseph's eventual fate (he will be a son "removed" and "added," that is, lost and found by his family). By retaining the Hebrew sounds in translation, a meaningful portion of the narrative is thus moved from footnotes, where it appears in most modern translations, back to the body of the text. That this is important is demonstrated by the fact that virtually every major (in this case, usually male) character in Genesis has his name explained in this manner.

It should be noted that such interpretations of names in the Bible are not based on philological derivations, that is, on scientific etymology. The name Jacob/Yaakov, for instance, which is understood in Gen. 25 as "Heel-Holder" and in Chapter 27 as "Heel-Sneak," probably held the original meaning of "may (God) protect." But the biblical writers were not so much concerned with what a name originally meant as they were with its sound, and with the associations inherent in that sound. Therefore what is important in our example is that "Yaakov" recalls *ekav*, "heel." This kind of interpretation is known as "folk etymology" or "popular etymology."

A third important technique through which biblical literature often conveys its message is what Buber called the "leading-word" principle. It holds that key ("leading") words are repeated within a text to signal major themes and concerns, rather like recurring themes in a piece of music. A leading-word operates primarily on the basis of sound: its repetition encourages the listener to make connections between diverse parts of a story and to trace a particular theme throughout. This is not, however, a static process. Such a word may appear in different contexts within a story, with changed meaning, thus lending a sense of movement and development to the text. One example may be cited here, to indicate the possibilities opened up by this technique (for others, the reader should consult "On the Book of Genesis and Its Structure," below, and the Commentary that accompanies the text of this book).

Buber's essay, "Abraham the Seer," traces the biblical tradition's portrayal of Abraham through the use of key words and phrases in the text. Chief among these is the verb "to see" (Hebrew *ra'o*), which appears constantly in the Abraham narratives and which tells us something significant about both the man himself and how he is meant to be remembered. At the outset of Abraham's journey to Canaan, which signals his entry into biblical tradition as an independent personality, God sends him off to a land that he will "let him see" (12:1). Arriving in the land, Abraham is granted a communication from God, expressed by the phrase "YHWH was seen by Avram . . ." (12:7). God subsequently promises the land to him and his descendants ("see from the place that you are . . . for all the land that you see, to you I give it and to your seed, for the ages"; 13:15). "Seeing" comes to the fore in the story of Abraham's concubine Hagar; her encounter with God's messenger ends with her addressing a "God of Seeing" (16:13). Further meetings between Abraham and God (17:1, 18:1) likewise express themselves visually, with the latter scene, where God announces Isaac's impending birth at Abraham's tent, almost unique in the Bible for its bold picture of God appearing directly to human beings. Finally, with the great test of Abraham in Chapter 22, the "Binding of Isaac," the theme of seeing is brought to a climax. Buber describes the use of the leading-word in that passage, summarizing how it rounds out the entire Abraham cycle.

It appears here more often than in any previous passage. Abraham *sees* the place where the act must be accomplished, at a distance. To the question of his son, he replies that God will provide ("see to") the lamb for the burnt offering. In the saving moment he lifts up his eyes and *sees* the ram. And now he proclaims over the altar the name that makes known the imperishable essence of this place, Mount Moriah: YHWH Will See. . . . God sees man, and man sees God. God sees Abraham, and tests him by seeing him as the righteous and "whole" man who walks before his God (17:1), and now, at the end of his road, he conquers even this final place, the holy temple mountain, by acting on God's behalf. Abraham sees God with the eye of his action and so recognizes Him, just as Moses, seeing God's glory "from behind," will recognize Him as Gracious and Merciful.\*

Buber goes one step further in his analysis of the leading-word *see*: he views it as a clue to the biblical concept of Abraham's role in history.

\* Martin Buber, *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies*, edited by Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), p. 42.

Taking the hint from I Sam. 9:9 (“the prophet of our day was formerly called a seer”), he posits that the Bible wants us to understand Abraham as the spiritual father of the later prophets. Abraham is preeminent as the first man in the Bible of whom it is told that God “was seen by him.”

Such an understanding of the role of leading-words as crucial to biblical style rarely makes itself felt in translation. Bible translators are reluctant to reproduce repetitions of Hebrew words in the text because they are generally fearful of creating a tedious English style. However, once one abandons the idea of the Bible as primarily a written work, the repetitiveness of leading-words becomes a signal rather than a stumbling block, freeing the reader to experience the dynamic manner in which the Bible expresses itself. That this sometimes entails a loss of nuance in the translation (where “see” in Hebrew may signify “perceive” or “understand” in a particular passage, for instance) is a price that must be paid; yet such a translation may in fact retain more of the breadth of the Hebrew than is immediately apparent.

A final word needs to be said about the leading-word technique. It may serve a purpose in the text beyond conveying meaning: it may play a structural role, unifying sections that have been culled from different sources within biblical Israel to form a composite account. The ancient redactors of the Bible apparently crafted the material they received into an organic whole. Using such means as leading-word repetition, they in effect created a new literature in which deep relationships exist between the parts of the whole.

Such a view is outside, though not incompatible with, biblical scholarship's century-old concern with finding “original sources.” It takes as its starting point the text as we now have it, and with some exceptions does not try to reconstruct an earlier version or extensively emend what we have. In that sense *In the Beginning* is a translation not of the Genesis of Moses' or Solomon's time, but of the Genesis that was included in the biblical canon in the formative, postbiblical period of Judaism and early Christianity.

The above three translation techniques—setting out the text in cola, transliterating and explaining Hebrew names, and reproducing leading-words—form the crux of an approach to the Bible's spokenness, but there are other methods used by the text to the same end. Three are particularly worthy of mention: word-play, allusion, and what I have termed small-scale repetition.

The Bible uses word-play to make a point forcefully, especially in prophetic passages or those with a prophetic flavor. In Gen. 40:13 and 19, for instance, Joseph predicts that the king of Egypt will end the imprisonment of two of his courtiers. When the cupbearer is to be restored to his former position, Joseph says,

in another three days  
Pharaoh will lift up your head. . . .

In contrast, when Joseph predicts that the chief baker will be executed, the text reads:

in another three days Pharaoh will lift up your head  
from off you. . . .

By beginning both statements with the same phrasing, the narrator is able to heighten the impact of "from off you" on both audience and victim.

Allusion is utilized in Gen. 39:6, where Joseph is described as "fair of form and fair to look at." Only one other character in the Bible is described with exactly the same expression—his mother, Rachel. By suggesting that Joseph is the image of his mother, the text reinforces the reason for Jacob's earlier obsessive love for him. Rachel's early death was a source of pain for Jacob until the end of his life (cf. 48:7), and Joseph's strong resemblance to her may have played a large role in shaping the relationship between father and son.

Small-scale repetition, unlike the leading-word technique, is limited to a brief report and is used to express one specific idea. In Gen. 6:11–13, for instance, it illustrates an important biblical concept: just punishment. Three times in the passage we hear the word "ruin," indicating what human evil has done to the world; the fourth time (v.13) it appears in a causative form, to show that God retaliates in exactly the same terms, measure for measure.

Now the earth had gone to *ruin* before God; the earth was filled with wrongdoing.

God saw the earth, and here: it had gone to *ruin*,  
for all flesh had *ruined* its way upon the earth.

God said to Noah:

An end of all flesh has come before me,  
for the earth is filled with wrongdoing through them;  
here, I will bring *ruin* upon them, along with the earth.

The Bible is fond of this technique, which it uses in a number of narratives that deal with human misbehavior (e.g., the Tower of Babel story in Gen. 11). It is another example of how the form in which the text is cast goes a long way toward expressing its intent.

I have taken pains to illustrate some of the rhetorical devices that emerge from an oral reading of Genesis in order to indicate the direction taken in *In the Beginning*. A concluding observation must be made. Every critic knows, or should know, that art defies categorization and exact description. We try to understand what makes a masterpiece tick, whether it be a painting, a piece of music, or a work of literature, yet in the end our analyses fall silent before the greatness and subtlety of the work itself. The techniques that I have described above must remain suggestive rather than definitive; they point in a direction rather than speaking directly. Biblical narratives do not end with the phrase "The moral of the story is . . .," any more than biblical laws overtly spell out their assumptions. Translating with attention to sound therefore may help to preserve not only the message of the text but also its ambiguity and open-endedness. In that persona the Bible has been familiar to Jewish and Christian interpreters, who for centuries have sought to fill in the gaps and resolve the difficulties in the text by means of their own ingenuity. This volume is aimed at helping present-day readers to share in that experience.

## 2

SOME READERS may wonder whether *In the Beginning* is merely an English translation of B-R. It is not. Although B-R served as the theoretical basis for my work, I have found it necessary to modify their approach in the present setting. There are a number of reasons for this.

For one, Bible scholarship has made notable advances since Buber's heyday (Rosenzweig had already died in 1929). Although he completed the German translation in 1961, and kept abreast of work in the field, it must be said that Buber did not greatly modify the text of the Pentateuch translation, philologically speaking, between 1930 when the second edition appeared and the revised printings of the mid-1950s. It seemed imperative to me to bring the work of postwar biblical philology to bear on the English translation, rather than relying solely on Buber's etymologies. Some of the changes in this area have been cited in the Notes to the text (as "B-R uses . . .").

Second, in the attempt to make the German translation mirror the Hebrew original Rosenzweig did not hesitate to either create new German words or reach back into the German literature of past ages to find forms suitable for rendering certain Hebrew expressions. To perform a corresponding feat in English would simply not work; the language is not flexible, and usages change so quickly that an artful appeal to the past seems futile except for the benefit of linguistic historians. While I have endeavored to produce an English text that reflects the style of biblical Hebrew, I have in the main shied away from pushing the language beyond reasonable and comprehensible limits.

There are other significant deviations from B-R here. I have used a different rendering of the name of God, which had been a distinctive B-R trademark (for an explanation, see "On the Name of God and Its Translation"). I have sometimes opted for different line divisions, based on my own hearing of the Hebrew; indented purely poetic passages, a practice not followed by B-R in narrative texts; read a large number of clauses differently from a grammatical or syntactical point of view; and loosened the practice, sometimes overdone in B-R, of reproducing a Hebrew root by a single English one wherever it occurs.

Finally, I have included here the one element that many readers of B-R felt was sorely lacking: notes and commentary. Every translation of the Bible implies a commentary but few have supplied one with the text. *In the Beginning* especially requires such an apparatus, both to explain its translation technique and to show how it may be used in interpreting the text. Along with the text, the explanatory material presents a methodology for studying the Bible.

All this said, *In the Beginning* is still very much in the B-R tradition. It retains the general approach adopted by its predecessor, exclusive of those principles that are dependent on the form and character of the German language. In addition it has continued to draw nourishment from its source, extending beyond the translation itself to Buber's and Rosenzweig's working papers. So I should like to think that this book continues a tradition, across a barrier of time and language, and that the last great contribution of German-Jewish culture has not been entirely lost.

### 3

IN THE BEGINNING is most heavily indebted to B-R, but there is also a contemporary context in which it may be viewed. In recent years interest

has been increasing in so-called literary interpretation of the Bible. A number of scholars have turned their attention to the forms and rhetoric of the biblical text, and the list of pertinent articles and books has begun to grow. While it is difficult to speak of these developments in terms of a "movement," there seems to be a strong trend emerging.

A "literary" approach, whose focus diverges from traditional (i.e., nineteenth- and twentieth-century) biblical scholarship's concern with historical and comparative study, is hardly new. Already in late antiquity Jewish explication of the Bible frequently centered around the text's style and exact wording, especially as heard aloud. Similarly, medieval Jewish commentators in Western Europe showed great sensitivity to the Bible's linguistic aspects. In both cases, however, a systematic approach was not developed, but rather literary interpretation remained interwoven with very different concerns such as homiletics, mysticism, and philosophy. It has remained for modern scholars, reacting partly against what they perceived to be the excessive historicizing of German Bible scholarship, to press for a literary reading of the Bible. Early pioneers in this regard include Umberto Cassuto, Buber and Meir Weiss in Israel, and Benno Jacob (who was consulted frequently during the writing of B-R) in Germany. More recently we might mention James Muilenberg (who labeled his approach "Rhetorical Criticism"), Edwin Good, James Ackerman, Robert Culley, and Robert Alter in North America, and to cite an oft-quoted European example, J. P. Fokkelman in Holland. A full list would be much longer. *In the Beginning* is related to the work of such scholars, not always directly, but as a kindred work. It has benefited greatly from exchanges with people in the field.

In that vein it should be noted that translations parallel to the present one have recently appeared in several languages. André Chouraqui in France and the Amsterdam Society for Old Testament Study have produced colometric (i.e., in cola) versions of various biblical books, with a full awareness of the contribution of B-R and a willingness to adapt their approach to new linguistic and philological requirements. It would appear that the groundwork is being laid for a new appreciation of the biblical text's artistry, above and beyond historical questions.

Can Bible scholarship ever get "beyond historical questions," and should that be the desired goal? Literary study of the Bible, like any relatively new discipline, occasionally suffers from either shallowness or interpretive overkill. As a field it is still struggling to achieve full legitimacy with historical study. But it would be a mistake to set up the two

disciplines in an adversarial relationship, as is often done. The Hebrew Bible is by nature a complex and multi-faceted piece of literature, in terms of both its origins and the history of its use and interpretation. No one "school" can hope to illuminate more than part of the whole picture, and even then one's efforts are bound to be fragmentary. It is probably only a synthesis of all the fruitful approaches available, into a fully interdisciplinary methodology, that will provide a truly balanced approach to the biblical text. Perhaps analogous to the relationship between concert performers and musicologists, literary and historical scholars need each other's skills and perceptiveness to do full justice to their subject. It is to be hoped that *In the Beginning* will make a contribution to that goal, by providing an English text and an underlying reading of the Hebrew that complement the existing translations.

## 4

MY ULTIMATE GOAL in this volume has been to show that reading the Hebrew Bible is a process, in the same sense that performing a piece of music is a process. Rather than carrying across ("translating") the content of the text from one linguistic realm to another, I have tried to involve the reader in the experience of giving it back ("rendering"), of returning to the source and recreating some of its richness. My task has been to present the raw material of the text as best as I can in English, and to point out some of the methods that may be fruitfully employed in wrestling with it.

Translators, said Goethe, should "arouse an irresistible desire for the original." They should also be able to communicate that the greatness of a work of art is not always something immediately accessible, but rather to be acquired through strenuous and loving effort. If *In the Beginning* helps to provide a medium for that kind of encounter to take place, then my own strenuous and loving efforts will have been more than amply rewarded.

EVERETT FOX

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Thanks go first of all to William Novak, who as editor of *Response* magazine was responsible for publishing the first edition of *In the Beginning*, as a complete issue of the magazine, in 1972. The appearance of the translation in print has enabled me to reap the benefits of the many reactions of both scholarly and general readers over the years, as well as to test its workability in a variety of educational, artistic, and liturgical settings.

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Among colleagues, Professor James Ackerman of Indiana University and Dr. Isaac Kikawada have been particularly supportive, and have given me a sense of commonality with those doing work in literary criticism of the Bible. I have profited greatly from years of discussion and sharing of work with Professors Herbert Mason and Dennis Tedlock of Boston University, in oral literature and in related religious literature. Of special meaning to me has been contact with the Amsterdam Society for Old Testament study, which thus far has produced notable Dutch "translations to be read aloud" of Jonah, Ruth, and Judges. I am grateful for the kindness of Dr. F. J. Hoogewoud of the Society, who is also librarian at the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana in Amsterdam, for sharing

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# TO AID THE READER

THE PRESENT Commentary to the text has deliberately been kept brief and suggestive. It is keyed to this particular English text as a reflection of the Hebrew, and is therefore designed to point out some of the structurally significant aspects of Genesis, tying together major themes and concerns. In that sense it may be termed a literary commentary, to distinguish it from historical treatments. It should be noted that the titled sections into which the Commentary is divided are not ironclad, but have been chosen for convenience of discussion.

The Notes to the text deal basically with textual matters. These include alternative translations (marked, "others use . . ."), sound-play in the Hebrew which is sometimes not reflected in the translation ("Heb. . . ."), allusions to other passages, clarifications of phrases, concepts, and institutions, and occasionally other readings or vocalizations of the Hebrew text ("some read . . ."). They also indicate places where the syntax or meaning of the Hebrew is in doubt ("Hebrew difficult"). Finally, the Notes include literary comments not found in the Commentary; these have been keyed to specific passages in the text.

I have mentioned in the Commentary and Notes only such material about the text's ancient Near Eastern background as I felt was absolutely necessary. A fuller treatment of this issue can be found in the standard commentaries such as Cassuto, Plaut, and Speiser. I have also chosen not to deal with matters of the origins or textual history of Genesis; these are complex and somewhat theoretical. The interested reader should again consult the standard works.

Names cited in parentheses in the Commentary and Notes refer to authors whose appropriate works are listed in "Suggestions for Further Reading," at the end of the book.



# ON THE NAME OF GOD AND ITS TRANSLATION

THE NAME of God, which has been translated here by the letters YHWH, has undergone numerous changes in the history of both its transcription and its translation. At an early period the correct pronunciation of the name was either lost or deliberately avoided out of a sense of religious awe. Jewish tradition came to vocalize and pronounce the name as “Adonai,” that is, “the/my Lord,” a usage that has remained in practice since late antiquity. In the Orthodox Jewish community one also hears “Ha-Shem,” “The Name,” used regularly.

Historically, Christian and Jewish translations in English have tended to use “Lord,” with some exceptions (such as Moffatt’s “The Eternal”). Both old and new attempts to recover the “correct” pronunciation of the Hebrew name have not succeeded; neither the sometimes-heard “Jehovah” nor the current scholarly “Yahweh” can be conclusively proven.

For their part, Buber and Rosenzweig sought to restore some of the name’s ancient power; early drafts of their translation reveal a good deal of experimentation to this end. They finally settled on a rather radical solution: representing the name by means of capitalized personal pronouns. The use of YOU, HE, HIM, etc., stemmed from their conviction that God’s name is not a proper name in the conventional sense, but rather one which evokes his immediate presence as such. Buber and Rosenzweig based this on their reading of Exodus 3:14, a text in which another verbal form of YHWH appears, and which they translated as “I will be-there as I will be-there”) (i.e., God explaining his name as a sign of presence).

The B-R rendering has its attraction in reading aloud, but it is on doubtful etymological ground. In addition it introduces an overly male emphasis through the constant use of “HE,” something which is not found in the text. I have therefore decided to follow the practice of printed Hebrew Bibles, which leave the name YHWH unvocalized. As one reads the translation aloud, one should pronounce the name according to one’s custom or based on one of the traditional options above.



# GUIDE TO THE PRONUNCIATION OF HEBREW NAMES

THE PRECISE pronunciation of biblical Hebrew cannot be determined with certainty. The following guide uses a standard of pronunciation which is close to that of modern Hebrew, and which will serve for the purpose of reading the text aloud.

- a* (e.g., Adam, Avraham) as in *father*
- e* (e.g., Lea, Levi, Rahel) as the *a* in *cape*
- o* (e.g., Edom, Lot) as in *horn*
- u* (e.g., Luz, Zevulun) as in *Buber*

When *e* occurs in both syllables of a name (e.g., Hevel, Lemekh), it is generally pronounced as the *e* in *ten*. In such cases the first syllable is the accented one; generally speaking, Hebrew accents the last syllable.

When *e* is the second letter of a name (e.g., Devora, Yehuda), it is often pronounced as the *a* in *ago*.

*kh* (e.g., Hanokh, Yissakhar) is to be sounded like the *ch* in Johann Sebastian *Bach*.

*h* (e.g., Havva, Het) most often indicates Hebrew *het*, pronounced less heavily than *kh* but not as English *h*.

Some names in the English text have kept their traditional English spelling; they refer to well-known terms. These include Canaan (Hebrew *Kena'an*), Egypt (*Mitzrayim*), Israel (*Yisrael*), Jordan (*Yarden*), and Pharaoh (*Par'o*). Otherwise, I have indicated the familiar forms of biblical names in the Notes, under the rubric "Trad. English . . .".



# ON THE BOOK OF GENESIS AND ITS STRUCTURE

THE TEXT of Genesis seems to speak with many voices. For a book whose basic arrangement is chronological, tracing the history of a single family, it exhibits a good deal of discontinuity on the surface. Here time flows uniformly, there taking startling jumps; fragments are followed by more or less full-blown tales; genres alternate, from mythic to genealogical to folkloristic. In addition, scholars often portray Genesis as a collection of historically diverse materials that were compiled by scribes for whom deviating from received tradition was anathema. Hence the repetitions, the inconsistencies, and the irregular pacing.

Is Genesis then at best a collection of stories related to the origins of Israel, with most of its seams showing? That hardly seems likely. If one approaches the book with an open mind, alert to its structure, without making assumptions beforehand, there is a scheme that begins to emerge. Whatever the compositional history of Genesis may have been—and it certainly appears to have been a complex one—we have before us the product of a rather single-minded consciousness. Using the Buber-Rosenzweig method of focusing on repeating words and key themes as the text presents them, it is possible to make some careful generalizations about the book's organization and to speculate on its overall intent.

On its most obvious level Genesis is a book about origins. It seeks to link the origin of the people of Israel with that of the world, relating in the process how various human characteristics and institutions arose.

On the surface this parallels much of ancient literature and folklore. All peoples are interested in their own beginnings, picturing them in a way which validates their present existence. Genesis, however, is different in that like the rest of the Torah, it downplays the heroic element of the people's origins and in its place stresses God's role in them. Moreover the one great omission—the origin of God—establishes from the beginning a unique basis for a tribal chronicle. From Genesis and subsequent books we learn primarily about God's relationship to the people and what he expects of them; almost everything else is subordinated to this purpose.

Preliminarily one can speak of at least seven major themes whose recurrence establishes their importance in the book:

1. *Origins*: Of the world, of humanity, and of the people of Israel.
2. *Order/Meaning in History*: By means of stylized or patterned chronology—reliance on certain round numbers such as 3, 7, and 40—it is suggested that human events are not random but somehow planned.
3. *Blessing*: From creation onward God bestows blessings on his creatures in general and on the fathers and mothers of Israel in particular.
4. *Covenant*: God concludes agreements with human beings.
5. *God Punishes Evildoing*: God is provoked to anger not by his capriciousness but by human failure to uphold justice and morality.
6. *Sibling Conflict, with the Younger Usually Emerging the Victor*: The order of nature (primacy of the firstborn) is overturned, demonstrating that God, not nature, is the ruling principle in human affairs.
7. *Testing*: God tests those who are to carry forth his mission; the result is the development of moral character.

Superseding these important themes, which occur throughout the Bible in various forms, is the dominant one of *continuity*, represented by the unifying word in Genesis *toledot* (“begettings”). The word appears eleven times, often accompanied by long genealogical lists. The names may deflect attention from what is central to Genesis. The major thrust of the book would seem to be toward human fecundity, following the early divine command to “bear fruit and be many” (1:28), and pointing toward the eventual fecundity of the people of Israel (which will only be realized in the book of Exodus). Such an emphasis seems appropriate in a book about origins.

Ironically, however, the undercurrent in Genesis points not to life and its continuation, but rather to its threatened extinction. In story after story the protagonist, his people, and occasionally the entire world are threatened. In at least one case (Avraham) a perfectly legal and natural solution is found—the birth of Yishmael as his heir—only to be rejected by God in favor of a more difficult one: a son born to an elderly woman.

It is clear that the stress on continuity and discontinuity has one purpose: to make clear that God is in control of history. Human fertility and continuity in history come not from magical rites or from the arbitrary decisions of the gods, but from a God who bases his rule on justice.

Nature disappears as a ruling factor in human affairs, replaced by a principle of morality which is unshakable precisely because it comes from a God who is beyond the rules of nature.

But the result is a book which abounds in tension. From the beginnings of human history (Chapter 4) we encounter contradictions and opposites, whether on a small scale (fertility and barrenness) or a large one (promise and delayed fulfillment). Nowhere is this so clear as in the dramatic high point of the book, Genesis 22. As Avraham stands with knife upraised, the entire enterprise of Genesis hangs in the balance. But the entire book is replete with such tensions and continuity-threatening situations. There are barren wives, brothers vowing to kill brothers, cities and even a world being destroyed by an angry God. The main characters of Genesis thus emerge as survivors, above all else. Noah sets the pattern, but he is merely the first, and too passive an example. The Patriarchs must brave hostile foreigners, bitter intrafamily struggles, and long wanderings before they can find peace.

While by the end of the book many of the tensions have been resolved, one conspicuously has not: God's promise of the land of Canaan. As the book ends, "in Egypt," we are left to ponder how this God, who keeps his promises to "those who love him" (Ex. 20:6), will bring the people back to their land—a land inhabited by someone else and in which the Children of Israel own only a burial site. Yet despite the tension, we may assume from the experiences of the Patriarchs that God will indeed "take account of" the Israelites (50:24), that he will take whatever ill has been planned against them and "plan-it-over for good" (50:20).

A word should also be said here about hero traditions. In the great epics of the ancient world the hero often stands as a lonely figure. He must overcome obstacles, fight monsters, acquire helpers (whether women, "sidekicks," or magic objects); and his triumph in the end signals man's triumph over his archenemy, Death. Every battle won, every obstacle hurdled, is psychologically a victory for us, the audience, a cathartic release from our own frustrating battle against death.

The Bible sees things rather differently. Death is also overcome, but not only by the individual's struggle. It is rather through the covenant community, bound together by God's laws and his promises, that the heroic vision is lived out. Despite the triumphs of the characters in Genesis, it is really in the book of Exodus that the great battle scenes (the plagues in Egypt, the Red Sea) and meetings with the divine (Mount Sinai) take place. And it is therefore God himself who is most properly

the “hero” of these stories. No major character in Genesis achieves success without depending fully on God, and the standards that are held up to them are ultimately seen as God’s own, to be imitated by imperfect humankind.

The book of Genesis falls naturally into four large sections. The first, usually termed the “Primeval History” (Chapters 1–11), begins with creation and progresses through the early generations of humanity, ending in Mesopotamia. The second (Chapters 12 through 25:18) is the cycle of stories concerning Avraham, the father of the people of Israel. Part III (Gen. 25:19 through Chapter 36) deals in the main with stories about his grandson Yaakov. The final section (Chapters 37–50) is the tale of Yosef and of how the Children of Israel came to live in Egypt (thus paving the way for the book of Exodus).

The following skeletal outline will lay out some of the interesting structural features of the book. There is an elemental symmetry that emerges from the four sections; further comments, especially about how the sections cohere, will be found in the explanatory material accompanying the text in this volume.

- I. Chosen Figure (Noah)
  - Sibling Hatred (Kayin–Hevel), with sympathy for youngest
  - Family Continuity Threatened (Hevel murdered)
  - Ends with Death (Haran, Terah; Sarai barren)
    - Humanity Threatened (Flood)
    - Ends Away from Land of Israel (“In Harran”)
- II. Chosen Figure (Avraham)
  - Sibling Hatred (Yishmael–Yitzhak) Implied, with sympathy for youngest
  - Family Continuity Threatened (Sarai barren, Yitzhak almost sacrificed)
  - Ends with Death (Sara, Avraham)
    - Rivalry Between Wives (Hagar–Sarai)
    - Barren Wife (Sarai)
    - Wife–Sister Story (Chaps. 12 and 20)
    - Ends with Genealogy of Non-Covenant Line (Yishmael)
- III. Chosen Figure (Yaakov)
  - Sibling Hatred (Esav–Yaakov), with sympathy for youngest
  - Family Continuity Threatened (Yaakov almost killed)
  - Ends with Death (Devora, Rahel, Yitzhak)

Rivalry Between Wives (Lea–Rahel)  
 Barren Wife (Rahel)  
 Wife–Sister Story (Chap. 26)  
 Ends with Genealogy of Non-Covenant Line (Esav)

#### IV. Chosen Figure (Yosef)

Sibling Hatred (Brothers–Yosef), with sympathy for youngest  
 Family Continuity Threatened (Yehuda's sons die; Yosef almost  
 killed; family almost dies in famine)  
 Ends with Death (Yaakov, Yosef)  
 Humanity Threatened (Famine)  
 Ends Away from Land of Israel ("In Egypt")

There is of course great variety within this bare structure; each version of a motif has its own special characteristics and emphases. Yet the patterning observed above gives the book a general coherence, above and beyond differences. It also demonstrates a conscious hand at work, one concerned about the texture of the book as a whole and able, despite the possible rigidity of what had been handed down, to shape the received material into a plastic and breathing unity.

Two general observations about Genesis will round out the picture here. First, as the book progresses there is a tendency for the style of the literature to become smoother. The abrupt changes and sometimes fragmentary nature of the material in Part I, and the vignettes built around Avraham's life in Part II, give way to a greater coherence and concentration in Part III, and finally to a relatively flowing and psychologically complete narrative in Part IV. Along with this, the characters in the latter half of the book seem to be more changeable and human, in contrast to Noah and Avraham, who often appear almost perfect models of piety.

Second, contact with God becomes less and less direct as Genesis moves on. Avraham's dreams and visions seem a far cry from Adam's conversations with God in the garden (although see Chapter 18); Yaakov's encounters with God are less frequent than Avraham's; and finally, Yosef never has a conversation with God, although he receives dream interpretations from him. This process of distancing may reflect an often-observed tendency in religions to think of primeval times as a "golden age" of closeness between gods and men, as contrasted to today (whenever one is writing), when humankind finds itself tragically distant from the divine and in need of communication.



# IN THE BEGINNING



# PART I The Primeval History

## (I–II)

THE COLLECTION of stories which forms Part I of Genesis has been assembled for a number of purposes:

1. History is traced from the creation of the world, in a direct line, down to Avraham, father of the People of Israel. Through use of the leading-word *toledot*, “begettings,” we are meant to view him as the logical end point in God’s preliminary plan in history.

2. The nature of God, as he will appear throughout the Hebrew Bible, is firmly established. He is seen as a Creator who is beyond fate, nature, and sexuality; as an all-powerful orderer and giver of meaning to history; as a bestower of blessing to living creatures; as a giver of choice to human beings; as a just punisher of evil and, simultaneously, a merciful ruler; and as a maker of covenants. The one quality of God which does not unfold until the Patriarchal stories (Parts II–IV) is his shaping of human destiny through focusing on the People of Israel. It is portrayed as the logical outcome of the characteristics just mentioned.

3. It appears that the Mesopotamian origins of Israel are reflected in such narratives as the Creation, the Flood, and the Tower of Babel, and are transformed or repudiated in the biblical versions. What in the older culture appears arbitrary and chaotic has been changed in the Bible into stories that stress morality and order. Further, human beings in Genesis Chapters I–II, despite their failure to live up to God’s expectations, are nevertheless considered capable of doing so, in contrast to the Mesopotamian view that humankind was created merely to be slaves to the gods.

4. Like virtually all other creation stories, Part I is concerned with the origin of the world and its institutions. Chapter 1 expounds on the origins of earth, sky, vegetation, animals, and human beings (as well as the Sabbath); Chapter 2, of sexuality, death, pain in childbirth, and work; Chapter 4, of sin, hatred, and murder, as well as of cities and

crafts; Chapter 6, of giants; and Chapter 10, of nations (including the low status of the Canaanites) and languages.

In sum, Part I serves as a fitting Prologue, not only to Genesis but to the entire Bible. The reader's chief task in interpreting it is to be able to determine the reason for the inclusion of any one section into the whole.

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1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

2 —Now the earth had been wild and waste,  
darkness over the face of Ocean,  
breath of God hovering over the face of the waters—

3 God said: Let there be light! And there was light.

4 God saw the light: that it was good.

God separated the light from the darkness.

5 God called the light: Day! and the darkness he called:  
Night!

There was evening, there was morning: one day.

6 God said:

Let there be a dome amid the waters,  
and let it separate waters from waters!

7 God made the dome

and separated the waters that were below the dome from the  
waters that were above the dome.

It was so.

8 God called the dome: Heaven!

There was evening, there was morning: second day.

9 God said:

Let the waters under the heavens be gathered to one place,  
and let the dry land be seen!

It was so.

10 God called the dry land: Earth! and the gathering of the  
waters he called: Seas!

God saw that it was good.

11 God said:

Let the earth sprout forth with sprouting-growth,  
plants that seed forth seeds, fruit trees that yield fruit, after  
their kind, (and) in which is their seed, upon the earth!  
It was so.

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*God as Creator* (1:1-2:4a): Three principal themes emerge from the great creation account with which Genesis opens. The first is the total and uncompromised power of God as creator; the second, the intrinsic order and balance of the created world; and the third, humankind's key position in the scheme of creation. These themes are brought home as much

- 1:1 **In the beginning . . .** : This phrase, which has long been the focus of debate among grammarians, can also be read: "At the beginning of God's creating of the heavens and the earth,/ when the earth was. . . ." The translation here, which is traditional in English, has been retained for stylistic reasons. **God created**: Indicative of God's power and not used in reference to humans, although later in the chapter such words as "make" and "form" do appear.
- 2 **Now the earth . . .** : Genesis 1 describes God's bringing order out of chaos, not creation from nothingness. **wild and waste**: Heb. *tohu va-vohu*, indicating "emptiness." **Ocean**: The primeval waters, a common (and usually divine) image in ancient Near Eastern mythology. **breath of God**: Others use "wind," "spirit"; the word (Heb. *ru'ah*) is open to both possibilities. See Ps. 33:6. **hovering**: Or "flitting." The image suggested by the word (see Deut. 32:11) is that of an eagle protecting its young.
- 3-5 **God said . . . God saw . . . God separated . . . God called**: Here, from the outset of the story the principle of order is stressed, through the rhythmic structure of "God" plus four verbs.
- 4 **God saw . . . that it was good**: The syntax is emphatic here; others use "God saw how good it was." The phrase is reminiscent of ancient Near Eastern descriptions of a craftsman being pleased with his work.
- 4 **separated**: The verb occurs four more times early in the chapter (vv.6, 7, 14, 18), and further points to the concept of order.
- 6 **dome**: Heb. *raki'a*, literally a beaten sheet of metal.
- 8 **Heaven**: The sky.
- 11 **sprout forth with sprouting-growth . . . seed forth seeds . . . fruit trees . . . fruit**: The three sound doublets create a poetic effect in God's pronouncement. Note that they are not repeated by the narrator in verse 12. See also verse 20, ". . . swarm with a swarm. . . ." **after their kind**: Here as in a number of passages in the translation I have shifted some words that occur in the singular (especially collectives) for the sake of clarity. See, for example, 6:3, 5.

- 12 The earth brought forth sprouting-growth,  
plants that seed forth seeds, after their kind,  
trees that yield fruit, in which is their seed, after their kind.  
God saw that it was good.
- 13 There was evening, there was morning: third day.
- 14 God said:  
Let there be lights in the dome of the heavens, to separate  
the day from the night,  
that they may be for signs—for set-times, for days and  
years,
- 15 and let them be for lights in the dome of the heavens, to  
provide light upon the earth!  
It was so.
- 16 God made the two great lights,  
the greater light for ruling the day and the smaller light for  
ruling the night,  
and the stars.
- 17 God placed them in the dome of the heavens  
18 to provide light upon the earth, to rule the day and the  
night, to separate the light from the darkness.  
God saw that it was good.
- 19 There was evening, there was morning: fourth day.
- 20 God said:  
Let the waters swarm with a swarm of living beings, and let  
fowl fly above the earth, across the dome of the heavens!
- 21 God created the great sea-serpents  
and all living beings that crawl about, with which the waters  
swarmed, after their kind,  
and all winged fowl after their kind.  
God saw that it was good.
- 22 And God blessed them, saying:  
Bear fruit and be many and fill the waters in the seas,  
and let the fowl be many on earth!
- 23 There was evening, there was morning: fifth day.
- 24 God said:  
Let the earth bring forth living beings after their kind,

by the form in which they are presented as by their actual mention.

God (Heb. *elohim*, a generic term) is introduced into the narrative without any description of origins, sex, or limitations of power. As the only functioning character of the chapter, he occupies center stage. There is no opposition, no resistance to his acts of creation, which occur in perfect harmony with his express word.

As a sign of both God's total control and his intent, the world unfolds in symmetrical order. The division of God's labor into six days, plus a seventh for rest, itself indicates a powerful meaningfulness at work, as well as providing the external structure for the narrative. Interpreters have tended to divide these into either three groups of two days or two groups of three, with always the same results: a balanced and harmonious whole. In addition, the number seven is significant (as it will be elsewhere in the Bible) as a symbol of perfection, not only in Israel but in the ancient world in general.

The narrative uses several repeating words and phrases to both unify the story and underscore the theme of order. These include "God said," "Let there be . . .," "God saw that it was good," "It was so," and "There was evening, there was morning . . ."

The text is so formed as to highlight the creation of humankind. Although in each previous day "God said" is the keynote, suggesting forethought as well as action, here (v.26) God fully spells out his intentions, as it were thinking out loud. Humanity, created in the divine "image," is to hold sway over the rest of creation. Only with the addition of humankind is God able to survey his newly formed world and to pronounce it "exceedingly good" (v.31).

At least two motifs appear in this chapter which will become important later in Genesis. The three occurrences of "blessing" (1:22, 1:28, 2:3) point to a central idea in the Patriarchal stories. In addition the concept of order and its logical conclusion—that history makes sense—figures prominently in the familial histories of the book. This is accomplished largely by the meaningful use of numbers, as above.

14 **lights:** In the sense of "lamps." **for signs—for set-times . . . :** Hebrew difficult.

21 **great sea-serpents:** The rebellious primeval monster of Ps. 74:13 (and common in ancient Near Eastern myth) is here depicted as merely another one of God's many creations.

22 **And God blessed them:** The first occurrence in Genesis of the key motif of blessing, which recurs especially throughout the Patriarchal stories. **Bear fruit and be many and fill:** Heb. *peru u-revu u-mil'u*.

herd-animals, crawling things, and the wildlife of the earth  
after their kind!

It was so.

- 25 God made the wildlife of the earth after their kind, and the  
herd-animals after their kind, and all crawling things of  
the soil after their kind.

God saw that it was good.

- 26 God said:

Let us make humankind, in our image, according to our  
likeness!

Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the fowl of  
the heavens, animals, all the earth, and all crawling things  
that crawl upon the earth!

- 27 God created humankind in his image,  
in the image of God did he create it,  
male and female did he create them.

- 28 God blessed them,

God said to them:

Bear fruit and be many and fill the earth  
and subdue it!

Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the fowl of the  
heavens, and all living things that crawl about upon the  
earth!

- 29 God said:

Here, I give you

all plants that bear seeds that are upon the face of all the  
earth,

and all trees in which there is tree fruit that bears seeds,  
for you shall they be, for eating;

- 30 and also for all the living things of the earth, for all the fowl  
of the heavens, for all that crawls about upon the earth in  
which there is living being—

all green plants for eating.

It was so.

- 31 Now God saw all that he had made,  
and here: it was exceedingly good!

There was evening, there was morning: the sixth day.

- 2:1 Thus were finished the heavens and the earth, with all of  
their array.

- 2 God had finished, on the seventh day, his work that he had made,  
and then he ceased, on the seventh day, from all his work that he had made.
- 3 God gave the seventh day his blessing, and he hallowed it, for on it he ceased from all his work, that by creating, God had made.

---

The entire account concludes (2:1–3) with a tightly structured poem. “God,” “the seventh day,” “work,” and “made” are mentioned three times, “finished,” “ceased,” and “all” twice; and “created” returns, echoing 1:1, to round out the whole creation narrative.

The postscript (2:4a; some scholars align it with what follows in Chapter 2 instead) introduces the key structural phrase of Genesis, “These are the begettings. . . .” It may also indicate the polemical intent of the creation story. Rosenzweig understood the verse to contrast “be-getting,” i.e., sexual creation as it occurs in non-Israelite myths, with the “true” creation.

In that vein, a final word needs to be said about extrabiblical evidence. As has often been pointed out, Genesis 1 is unmistakably reacting against prevailing Near Eastern cosmogonies of the time. Most of the cultures surrounding ancient Israel had elaborate creation stories, highlighting the birth, sexuality, and violent uprisings of the gods. As we indicated at the outset, the concept of God presented here militates against such ideas, arguing chiefly out of omission and silence. (It should also be noted that in poetic books such as Isaiah, Job, and Psalms, a tradition about violent

- 26 **in our image:** The “our” is an old problem. Some take it to refer to the heavenly court (although, not surprisingly, no angels are mentioned here).
- 27 **God created humankind:** The narrative breaks into verse, stressing the importance of human beings. “Humankind” (Heb. *adam*) does not specify sex, as is clear from the last line of the poem.
- 29 **I give you:** “You” in the plural.
- 30 **all green plants for eating:** Human beings in their original state were not meat-eaters. For the change, see 9:3ff.
- 31 **exceedingly good. . . . the sixth day:** The two qualifiers “exceedingly” and “the” are deviations from the previous expressions in the story, and underscore the sixth day (when humankind was created) as the crowning achievement of creation (or else serve as a summary to the whole).
- 2:3 **gave . . . his blessing:** Or “blessed,” here expanded in English for rhythmical reasons. **by creating, God had made:** Hebrew difficult. Buber’s working papers show numerous attempts at a solution.

- 4 These are the begettings of the heavens and the earth: their being created.

On the day that YHWH, God, made earth and heaven,  
5 no bush of the field was yet on earth,  
no plant of the field had yet sprung up,  
for YHWH, God, had not made it rain upon earth,  
and there was no human/*adam* to till the soil/*adama*—  
6 but a surge would well up from the ground and water all  
the face of the soil;  
7 and YHWH, God, formed the human, of dust from the  
soil,  
he blew into his nostrils the rush of life  
and the human became a living being.

8 YHWH, God, planted a garden in Eden/Land-of-Pleasure,  
in the east,  
and there he placed the human whom he had formed.  
9 YHWH, God, caused to spring up from the soil  
every type of tree, desirable to look at and good to eat,  
and the Tree of Life in the midst of the garden  
and the Tree of the Knowing of Good and Evil.

- 10 Now a river goes out from Eden, to water the garden,  
and from there it divides and becomes four stream-heads.  
11 The name of the first one is Pishon/Spreader—that is the  
one that circles through all the land of Havila, where gold  
is;  
12 the gold of that land is good, there too are bdellium and the  
precious-stone carnelian.  
13 The name of the second river is Gihon/Gusher—that is the  
one that circles through all the land of Cush.  
14 The name of the third river is Hiddekel/Tigris—that is the  
one that goes to the east of Assyria.  
And the fourth river—that is Perat/Euphrates.  
15 YHWH, God, took the human and set him in the garden of  
Eden,  
to work it and to watch it.

- 16 YHWH, God, commanded concerning the human, saying:  
 From every other tree of the garden you may eat, yes, eat,  
 17 but from the Tree of the Knowing of Good and Evil—  
 you are not to eat from it,  
 for on the day that you eat from it, you must die, yes, die.
- 

conflict at creation has been preserved.) The Genesis narrative has taken such old mythological motifs as battles with the primeval (female) waters or with sea monsters and eliminated or neutralized them. What remains is both utterly simple and radical in its time.

*Garden and Expulsion* (2:4b–3:24): From the perspective of God in Chapter 1, we now switch to that of humankind (note how the opening phrase in 2:4b, “earth and heaven,” reverses the order found in 1:1). This most famous of all Genesis stories contains an assortment of mythic

- 4b **On the day:** At the time. **YHWH:** For a discussion of the name of God and its translation and pronunciation, see p. xxix.
- 5 **human/adam . . . soil/adama:** The sound connection, the first folk etymology in the Bible, establishes the intimacy of mankind with the ground (note the curses in 3:17 and 4:11). Human beings are created from the soil, just as animals are (v.19).
- 6 **surge:** Or “flow.”
- 7 **rush:** Or “breath.”
- 8 **Eden/Land-of-Pleasure:** For another use of the Hebrew root, see 18:12. The usage here may be a folk etymology; Speiser translates it as “steppe.”
- 9 **Tree of Life:** Conferring immortality on the eater of its fruit. **Knowing of Good and Evil:** Interpreters disagree on the meaning of this phrase. It could be a merism (as in “knowledge from A to Z”—that is, of everything), or an expression of moral choice.
- 10 **stream-heads:** Branches or tributaries.
- 12 **bdellium . . . carnelian:** Identification uncertain; others suggest, for instance, “lapis” and “onyx.”
- 15 **work:** A different Hebrew word (here, *avod*) from the one used in 2:2–3 (*melakha*).
- 16 **eat, yes, eat:** Heb. *akhol tokhel*, literally, “eating you may eat.” Others use “you may freely eat”; I have followed B-R’s practice of doubling the verb throughout, which retains the sound as well as the meaning. In this passage, as in many instances, I have inserted the word “yes” for rhythmical reasons.
- 17 **die, yes, die:** Others use “surely die.”

- 18 Now YHWH, God, said:  
It is not good for the human to be alone,  
I will make him a helper corresponding to him.
- 19 So YHWH, God, formed from the soil every living-thing of  
the field and every fowl of the heavens  
and brought each to the human, to see what he would call  
it;  
and whatever the human called it as a living being, that  
became its name.
- 20 The human called out names for every herd-animal and for  
the fowl of the heavens and for every living-thing of the  
field,  
but for the human, there could be found no helper  
corresponding to him.
- 21 So YHWH, God, caused a deep slumber to fall upon the  
human, so that he slept,  
he took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh in its place.
- 22 YHWH, God, built the rib that he had taken from the  
human into a woman  
and brought her to the human.
- 23 The human said:  
This-time, she-is-it!  
Bone from my bones,  
flesh from my flesh!  
She shall be called Woman/*Isha*,  
for from Man/*Ish* she was taken!
- 24 Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings  
to his wife,  
and they become one flesh.
- 25 Now the two of them, the human and his wife, were nude,  
yet they were not ashamed.
- 3:1 Now the snake was more shrewd than all the living-things  
of the field that YHWH, God, had made.  
It said to the woman:  
Even though God said: You are not to eat from any of the  
trees in the garden . . . !
- 2 The woman said to the snake:

elements and images which are common to human views of prehistory: the lush garden, four central rivers located (at least partially) in fabled lands, the mysterious trees anchoring the garden (and the world?), a primeval man and woman living in unashamed nakedness, an animal that talks, and a God who converses regularly and intimately with his creatures. The narrative presents itself, at least on the surface, as a story of origins. We are to learn the roots of human sexual feelings, of pain in childbirth, and how the anomalous snake (a land creature with no legs) came to assume its present form. Most strikingly, of course, the story seeks to explain the origin of the event most central to human consciousness: death.

The narrative unfolds through a series of contrasts: good and evil, life and death, heaven and earth, give and take, knowledge and ignorance, mankind and animals, hiding and revealing. Some of these concepts appear literally as key words in the text. The characters also appear through contrasts: man as God's image and as dust, woman as helper and hinderer, the snake as shrewd and (after the curse) lowly.

A further focus is provided by the echoing of the word "eat," whose connotation changes from sustenance/bounty (2:9, 16) to prohibition (2:17) to misunderstanding (3:1–5) and disobedience (3:6, 11–13), and finally to curse (3:14, 17, 19). Such a flexible use of words sets up a rhythmic drama which, as much of Genesis, bears resemblance to poetry rather than to prose.

Part I of the story (Chapter 2) sets the stage in the garden, focusing on Adam, "Everyman" (see *Cambridge Bible Commentary*, Gen. 1–11). God is here regularly called "YHWH, God," a rare designation which may suggest a preexpulsion view of the wholeness of God as well as of mankind. Man continues his status as "God's image" (1:26–27), imitating

18 **It is not good:** In contrast to the refrain of Genesis 1, "God saw that it was good." **corresponding to:** Lit. "opposite." The whole phrase (Heb. *ezer kenegdo*) could be rendered "a helping counterpart." At any rate, the Hebrew does not suggest a subordinate position for women.

20 **called out:** Or "gave." **for the human:** Others use "for Adam" or "for a man."

21 **ribs:** Or possibly "sides," paralleling other ancient peoples' concept of an original being that was androgynous.

23 **She:** Lit. "this-one."

3:1 **Even though God said:** Others use "Did God really say . . . ?" **in the garden . . . !:** Such an uncompleted phrase, known as aposeopesis, leaves it to the reader to complete the speaker's thought, which in the Bible is usually an oath or a threat (see also, for instance, 14:23, 21:23, 26:29, 31:50).

- From the fruit of the other trees in the garden we may eat,  
3 but from the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the  
garden, God has said:  
You are not to eat from it and you are not to touch it,  
lest you die.
- 4 The snake said to the woman:  
Die, you will not die!
- 5 Rather, God knows  
that on the day that you eat from it, your eyes will be  
opened  
and you will become like gods, knowing good and evil.
- 6 The woman saw  
that the tree was good for eating  
and that it was a delight to the eyes,  
and the tree was desirable to contemplate.  
She took from its fruit and ate  
and gave also to her husband beside her,  
and he ate.
- 7 The eyes of the two of them were opened  
and they knew then  
that they were nude.  
They sewed fig leaves together and made themselves  
loincloths.
- 8 Now they heard the sound of YHWH, God, who was  
walking about in the garden at the breezy-time of the day.  
And the human and his wife hid themselves from the face  
of YHWH, God, amid the trees of the garden.
- 9 YHWH, God, called to the human and said to him:  
Where are you?
- 10 He said:  
I heard the sound of you in the garden and I was afraid,  
because I am nude,  
so I hid myself.
- 11 He said:  
Who told you that you are nude?  
From the tree about which I command you not to eat,  
have you eaten?
- 12 The human said:

The woman whom you gave to be beside me, she gave me  
from the tree,  
and so I ate.

- 13 YHWH, God, said to the woman:  
What is this that you have done?  
The woman said:  
The snake enticed me,  
and so I ate.
- 

the divine act of giving names (1:5, 8, 10). He is also nevertheless a creature of the dust, both at the beginning (2:7) and end (3:19) of the story.

The bridge to Part II (Chapter 3) is deftly accomplished by linking two identical-sounding words in the Hebrew, *arum* (here, “nude” and “shrewd”). The choice of the snake as the third character is typically ancient Near Eastern (it is so used in other stories about death and immortality, such as the *Gilgamesh Epic* from Mesopotamia). Some interpreters have seen sexual overtones in this choice as well. Yet a plain reading of the text need not overemphasize the snake, who disappears as a personality once the fatal fruit has been eaten.

The ending of the story has also raised questions of interpretation. Buber was among those who see in the act of expulsion from the garden a deed of mercy rather than one of fear or jealousy. Certainly a creature whose first act upon acquiring new “knowledge” is to cover himself up poses no threat to the Creator. The text, like its late successor, the book of Job, may be suggesting that in the human sphere, unlike the divine, knowledge and mortality are inextricably linked. This is a tragic realization, but it is also the world as human beings know it.

Although the specifics of this story are never again referred to in the Hebrew Bible, and are certainly not crucial for the rest of Genesis, one general theme is central to the Bible’s world view. This is that rebellion

5 **you:** Plural. **like gods:** Or “like God.”

8 **breezy-time:** Evening. **face of God:** The “face” or presence of God is a dominating theme in many biblical stories and in the book of Psalms. Man seeks God’s face or hides from it; God reveals it to him or hides it from him.

12 **gave to be:** Put. “Give” has been retained here, despite its awkwardness, as a repeating word in the narrative.

- 14 YHWH, God, said to the snake:  
Because you have done this,  
cursed be you from all the animals and from all the  
living-things of the field;  
upon your belly shall you walk and dust shall you eat, all  
the days of your life.
- 15 I put enmity between you and the woman, between your  
seed and her seed:  
they will bruise you on the head, you will bruise them in  
the heel.
- 16 To the woman he said:  
I will multiply, multiply your pain (from) your pregnancy,  
with pains shall you bear children.  
Toward your husband will be your lust, yet he will rule  
over you.
- 17 To Adam he said:  
Because you have hearkened to the voice of your wife  
and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded  
you, saying:  
You are not to eat from it!  
Cursed be the soil on your account,  
with painstaking labor shall you eat from it, all the days of  
your life.
- 18 Thorn and sting-shrub let it spring up for you,  
when you seek to eat the plants of the field!
- 19 By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread,  
until you return to the soil,  
for from it you were taken.  
For you are dust, and to dust shall you return.
- 20 The human called his wife's name: Havva/Life-giver!  
For she became the mother of all the living.
- 21 Now YHWH, God, made Adam and his wife coats of skins  
and clothed them.
- 22 YHWH, God, said:  
Here, the human has become like one of us, in knowing  
good and evil.

- So now, lest he send forth his hand  
and take also from the Tree of Life  
and eat  
and live throughout the ages . . . !
- 23 So YHWH, God, sent him away from the garden of Eden,  
to work the soil from which he had been taken.
- 24 He drove the human out  
and caused to dwell, eastward of the garden of Eden,  
the winged-sphinxes and the flashing, ever-turning sword  
to watch over the way to the Tree of Life.

---

against or disobedience toward God and his laws results in banishment/estrangement and, literally or figuratively, death. Thus from the beginning the element of *choice*, so much stressed by the Prophets later on, is seen as the major element in human existence.

All this said, it should be recognized that the garden story, like many biblical texts, has been the subject of endless interpretation. One line of thought takes the psychological point of view. The story resembles a vision of childhood and of the transition to the contradictions and pain of adolescence and adulthood. In every way—moral, sexual, and intellectual—Adam and Havva are like children, and their actions after partaking of the fruit seem like the actions of those who are unable to cope with newfound powers. The resolution of the story, banishment from the garden, suggests the tragic realization that human beings must make their way through the world with the knowledge of death and with great

15 **seed:** Offspring, descendants.

17 **painstaking labor:** Heb. *itzavon*. Man and woman receive equal curses (see verse 16, “pain . . . pains”).

18 **sting-shrub:** Heb. *dardar*; thistle (“thorns and thistles” suggests an alliteration not found in the Hebrew).

20 **Havva:** Trad. English “Eve.”

21 **God . . . clothed them:** Once punishment has been pronounced, God cares for the man and the woman. Both aspects of God comprise the biblical understanding of his nature, and they are not exclusive of each other.

22 **one of us:** See note on 1:26. **throughout the ages:** Or “for the eons”; others use “forever.”

24 **winged-sphinxes:** Mythical ancient creatures, also represented on the Ark of the Covenant (Ex. 25:18). “Cherubim,” the traditional English rendering, has come to denote chubby, red-cheeked baby angels in Western art, an image utterly foreign to the ancient Near East.

- 4:1 The human knew Havva his wife,  
 she became pregnant and bore Kayin.  
 She said:  
*Kaniti*/I-have-gotten  
 a man, as has YHWH!
- 2 She continued bearing—his brother, Hevel.  
 Now Hevel became a shepherd of flocks, and Kayin became a  
 worker of the soil.
- 3 It was, after the passing of days  
 that Kayin brought, from the fruit of the soil, a gift to  
 YHWH,
- 4 and as for Hevel, he too brought—from the firstborn of his  
 flock, from their fat-parts.  
 YHWH had regard for Hevel and his gift,
- 5 for Kayin and his gift he had no regard.  
 Kayin became exceedingly enraged and his face fell.
- 6 YHWH said to Kayin:  
 Why are you so enraged? Why has your face fallen?
- 7 Is it not thus:  
 If you intend good, bear-it-aloft,  
 but if you do not intend good,  
 at the entrance is sin, a crouching-demon,  
 toward you his lust—  
 but you can rule over him.
- 8 Kayin said to Hevel his brother . . .  
 But then it was, when they were out in the field  
 that Kayin rose up against Hevel his brother  
 and he killed him.
- 9 YHWH said to Kayin:  
 Where is Hevel your brother?  
 He said:  
 I do not know. Am I the watcher of my brother?
- 10 Now he said:  
 What have you done!  
 A sound—your brother's blood cries out to me from the  
 soil!

physical difficulty. At the same time the archetypal man and woman do not make the journey alone. They are provided with protection (clothing), given to them by the same God who punished them for their disobedience. We thus symbolically enter adulthood with the realization that being turned out of Paradise does not mean eternal rejection or hopelessness.

*The First Brothers* (4:1-16): With the story of Kayin and Hevel the narrative points both forward and backward. For the first time the major Genesis themes of struggle and sibling hatred, and discontinuity between the generations, make their appearance. In addition the concept of *sin* is introduced (Rosenzweig), having not appeared by name previously.

One may observe significant links to the garden story. Once again human beings are given a choice; once again disregarding the warning leads to death and estrangement from God; and once again the primal bond between mankind and the soil is ruptured. Chapter 3 is directly recalled by the use of specific wording: God echoes the curse he had put on the woman (3:16) in his warning to Kayin (4:7), and "Where is Hevel your brother?" (4:9) brings to mind "Where are you?" (3:9), which had been addressed to Kayin's father.

The text is punctuated by the use of "brother," a meaningful seven times, as well as by changing connotations of the word "face" (Kayin, unable to bring about a "lifting" of his own face, becomes estranged from God's). Repetition also helps to convey the harshness of Kayin's punishment: he is exiled to the "land of Nod/Wandering" (v.16), for which we have been prepared by the "wavering and wandering" of verses 12 and 14.

- 4:1 **knew**: Intimately; a term for sexual intercourse. **Kayin**: Trad. English "Cain." The name means "smith" (see also v.22, below). **I-have-gotten**: Others use "I have created." **as has YHWH**: Hebrew difficult.
- 2 **Hevel**: The name suggests "something transitory" (see the opening of the book of Ecclesiastes: *havel havalim*).
- 3 **gift**: Heb. *minha*, usually referring to sacrifices.
- 4 **fat-parts**: I.e., the choicest.
- 5 **enraged**: Lit. "his (anger) was kindled."
- 7 **Is it not thus . . .**: Hebrew obscure. **bear-it-aloft**: Others use "there is forgiveness," "there is uplift." **toward you his lust—/ but you can rule over him**: Recalling God's words to Havva in 3:16.
- 8 **Kayin said . . .**: The verse appears incomplete. Ancient versions add "Come, let us go out into the field."
- 10 **A sound**: Or "Hark!"

- 11 And now,  
cursed be you from the soil,  
which opened up its mouth to receive your brother's blood  
from your hand.
- 12 When you wish to work the soil  
it will not henceforth give its strength to you;  
wavering and wandering must you be on earth!
- 13 Kayin said to YHWH:  
My punishment is too great to be borne!
- 14 Here, you drive me away today from the face of the soil,  
and from your face must I conceal myself,  
I must be wavering and wandering on earth—  
now it will be  
that whoever comes upon me will kill me!
- 15 YHWH said to him:  
No, therefore,  
whoever kills Kayin, sevenfold will it be avenged!  
So YHWH set a sign for Kayin,  
so that whoever came upon him would not strike him down.
- 16 Kayin went out from the face of YHWH  
and settled in the land of Nod/Wandering, east of Eden.
- 17 Kayin knew his wife;  
she became pregnant and bore Hanokh.  
Now he became the builder of a city  
and called the city's name according to his son's name,  
Hanokh.
- 18 To Hanokh was born Irad,  
Irada begot Mehuyael,  
Mehuyael begot Metushael,  
Metushael begot Lemekh.
- 19 Lemekh took himself two wives,  
the name of the first one was Ada, the name of the second  
was Tzilla.
- 20 Ada bore Yaval,  
he was the father of those who sit amidst tent and herd.
- 21 His brother's name was Yuval,  
he was the father of all those who play the lyre and the  
pipe.

- 22 And Tzilla bore as well—Tuval-Kayin,  
burnisher of every blade of bronze and iron.  
Tuval-Kayin's sister was Naama.
- 23 Lemekh said to his wives:  
Ada and Tzilla, hearken to my voice,  
wives of Lemekh, give ear to my saying:  
Aye—a man I kill for wounding me,  
a lad for only bruising me!
- 24 Aye—if sevenfold vengeance be for Kayin,  
then for Lemekh, seventy-sevenfold!
- 25 Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son.  
She called his name: Shet/Granted-One!  
meaning: God has granted me another seed in place of  
Hevel,  
for Kayin killed him.
- 

Although this story may well have originated as a tale of enmity between two ways of life (farmer and shepherd), or in another context, it has obviously been transformed into something far more disturbing and universal.

*The Line of Kayin* (4:17–26): From whole stories the text turns to several brief accounts, some of which are clearly fragments. The first of these deals with origins: of cities, of certain crafts, and of worship. The former two are associated (perhaps negatively) with Kayin's line. The only personality in these texts about whom we learn anything is Lemekh—and his "saying" (vv.23–24) seems hopelessly obscure. Some interpreters have understood it as a challenge to God, and thus believe that it has been included here as an example of the wickedness typical of the generations that preceded the Flood.

The names of Adam and Havva's son and grandson (vv.25–26) are sad reminders of Hevel's death—a personal touch in an otherwise prosaic section of narrative.

- 15 **a sign:** The exact appearance of the sign is not specified. It is a warning and a protection, not the punishment itself (which is exile).
- 17 **Now he:** "He" refers to Kayin.
- 18 **Mehuyael begot:** Heb. *Mehiyael*.
- 19 **Ada . . . Tzilla:** The names suggest "dawn" and "dusk" (Gaster).
- 20 **father:** Ancestor or founder.
- 22 **burnisher . . . :** Or "craftsman of every cutting-edge of copper and iron."

- 26 To Shet as well a son was born,  
he called his name: Enosh/Mortal.

At that time they first called out the name of YHWH.

- 5:1 This is the record of the begettings of Adam/Humankind.  
On the day of God's creating humankind,  
in the likeness of God did he then make it,  
2 male and female he created them  
and gave blessing to them  
and called their name: Humankind!  
on the day of their being created.  
3 When Adam had lived thirty and a hundred years,  
he begot one in his likeness, according to his image,  
and called his name Shet.  
4 Adam's days after he begot Shet were eight hundred years,  
and he begot other sons and daughters.  
5 And all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred years  
and thirty years,  
then he died.  
6 When Shet had lived five years and a hundred years, he  
begot Enosh,  
7 and Shet lived after he begot Enosh seven years and eight  
hundred years, and begot other sons and daughters.  
8 And all the days of Shet were twelve years and nine  
hundred years,  
then he died.  
9 When Enosh had lived ninety years, he begot Kenan,  
10 and Enosh lived after he begot Kenan fifteen years and  
eight hundred years, and begot other sons and daughters.  
11 And all the days of Enosh were five years and nine hundred  
years,  
then he died.  
12 When Kenan had lived seventy years, he begot Mehalalel,  
13 and Kenan lived after he begot Mehalalel forty years and  
eight hundred years, and begot other sons and daughters.

- 14 And all the days of Kenan were ten years and nine hundred years,  
then he died.
- 15 When Mehalalel had lived five years and sixty years, he  
begot Yered.
- 16 and Mehalalel lived after he begot Yered thirty years and  
eight hundred years, and begot other sons and daughters.
- 17 And all the days of Mehalalel were ninety-five years and  
eight hundred years,  
then he died.
- 18 When Yered had lived sixty-two years and a hundred years,  
he begot Hanokh,
- 19 and Yered lived after he begot Hanokh eight hundred years,  
and begot other sons and daughters.
- 20 And all the days of Yered were sixty-two years and nine  
hundred years,  
then he died.
- 

*From Adam to Noah (5):* The extraordinary numbers in this section are significant, not so much for their length as for their message. Cassuto has tried to fit them into a defined scheme, showing that the purpose, and achieved effect, of our text is to convey that human history follows a meaningful pattern. Pride of place on the list is occupied by the seventh member, Hanokh, who is portrayed as the first man of God. He serves as a preparation for Noah, who also “walks in accord with God” (6:9). Hanokh’s life span, 365 years, exemplifies the number scheme of Genesis: as an expression of numerical perfection (the number of days in a year), it symbolizes moral perfection.

26 **called out the name of YHWH:** I.e., worshipped God.

5:1 **On the day . . . :** The language is reminiscent of the earlier poem in 1:27. In this case, however, the Hebrew creates a rhyming effect. The cola of the poem here end thus: *bera’am / otam / shemam: Adam/ hibare’am*. Such a rhyming scheme is rare in biblical Hebrew, and usually endows a passage with particular significance (see also, for instance, II Sam. 12:11).

18 **Hanokh:** Trad. English “Enoch.”

- 21 When Hanokh had lived sixty-five years, he begot  
Metushelah,  
22 and Hanokh walked in accord with God after he begot  
Metushelah three hundred years, and begot other sons  
and daughters.  
23 And all the days of Hanokh were sixty-five years and three  
hundred years.  
24 Now Hanokh walked in accord with God,  
then he was no more,  
for God had taken him.
- 25 When Metushelah had lived eighty-seven years and a  
hundred years, he begot Lemekh,  
26 and Metushelah lived after he begot Lemekh eighty-two  
years and seven hundred years, and begot other sons and  
daughters.  
27 And all the days of Metushelah were sixty-nine years and  
nine hundred years,  
then he died.
- 28 When Lemekh had lived eighty-two years and a hundred  
years, he begot a son.  
29 He called his name: Noah!  
saying:  
*Zeh yenahamenu*/May he comfort-our-sorrow  
from our toil, from the pains of our hands  
coming from the soil, which YHWH has cursed.
- 30 And Lemekh lived after he begot Noah ninety-five years  
and five hundred years, and begot other sons and  
daughters.  
31 And all the days of Lemekh were seventy-seven years and  
seven hundred years,  
then he died.
- 32 When Noah was five hundred years old,  
Noah begot Shem, Ham, and Yefet.

- 6:1 Now it was when humans first became many on the face of  
the soil  
and women were born to them,  
2 that the divine beings saw how beautiful the human women  
were,  
so they took themselves wives, whomever they chose.
- 3 YHWH said:  
My breath shall not remain in humankind for ages, for they  
too are flesh;  
let their days be then a hundred and twenty years!
- 

*Antiquity and the Preparation for the Flood* (6:1–8): The final pre-Flood section of the text includes a theme common to other ancient tales: the biological mixing of gods and men in dim antiquity. Perhaps this fragment, which initially seems difficult to reconcile with biblical ideas about God, has been retained here to round out a picture familiar to ancient readers, and to recall the early closeness of the divine and the human which, according to many cultures, later dissolved. It is also possible that the episode serves as another example of a world that has become disordered, thus providing further justification for a divinely ordered destruction.

The stage is set for the Flood by means of a powerful sound reference.

- 22 **and Hanokh walked in accord with God . . . three hundred years:** The variation from the rigid formulations of this chapter draws attention to this key figure, the first pious man (similarly with Noah, 5:29). “Walked in accord with God” means walked in God’s ways, led a righteous life.
- 24 **then he was no more:** He died. Later interpreters found the phrase ambiguous, and fantastic postbiblical legends arose concerning Hanokh (see Ginzberg).
- 31 **seventy-seven years and seven hundred years:** As in 4:24, a man named Lemekh is linked to multiples of seven.
- 6:2 **divine beings:** Or “godlings.”
- 3 **for they too are flesh:** Hebrew difficult. The text uses the singular. **a hundred and twenty years:** Some early interpreters take this to specify a “grace period” for mankind before the Flood. The text seems to be setting the limits of the human life span.

- 4 The giants were on earth in those days,  
and afterward as well,  
when the divine beings came in to the human women  
and they bore them (children)—  
they were the heroes who were of former ages, the men of  
name.
- 5 Now YHWH saw  
that great was humankind's evildoing on earth  
and every form of their heart's planning was only evil all the  
day.
- 6 Then YHWH was sorry  
that he had made humankind on earth,  
and it pained his heart.
- 7 YHWH said:  
I will blot out humankind, whom I have created, from the  
face of the soil,  
from human to animal, to crawling thing and to the fowl of  
the heavens,  
for I am sorry that I made them.
- 8 But Noah found favor in the eyes of YHWH.
- 9 These are the begettings of Noah.  
Noah was a righteous, whole man in his generation,  
in accord with God did Noah walk.
- 10 Noah begot three sons: Shem, Ham, and Yefet.
- 11 Now the earth had gone to ruin before God, the earth was  
filled with wrongdoing.
- 12 God saw the earth, and here: it had gone to ruin,  
for all flesh had ruined its way upon the earth.
- 13 God said to Noah:  
An end of all flesh has come before me,  
for the earth is filled with wrongdoing through them;  
here, I am about to bring ruin upon them, along with the  
earth.
- 14 Make yourself an Ark of *gofer* wood,  
with reeds make the Ark,

In 5:29 Noah was named, ostensibly to comfort his elders' "sorrow" over human "pains" in tilling the soil. Here (6:6), however, the meaning of the name has been ironically reversed. The one who was supposed to bring comfort only heralds God's own being "sorry" and "pained" (vv. 6–7). A similar ironic word-play, where the audience knows what the name-bestower does not, occurs in Ex. 2:3; curiously, the hero of that passage, the baby Moses, is also connected with an "ark"—the term for the little basket in which he is set adrift.

*The Deluge* (6:9–8:19): The biblical account of the Flood is replete with echoes and allusions which point to three clear motifs: God's justice, the totality of punishment, and a new beginning patterned after Genesis 1.

The first of these is brought out in 6:11–13: the repetition of the word "ruin" indicates not only the sorry state of society but also the principle of just retaliation, for God is to "bring ruin" upon the earth (v.13).

The totality of the disaster is conveyed by the repeated use of the word "all" in 7:21–23, as well as by the completeness of the list of those destroyed (7:21–23). Humans, as befits their place in the order of creation, appear last, but actually it is they who drag virtually all of creation down with them. This reflects a deeply held biblical idea that human

4 **came in to:** The common biblical term for sexual intercourse. The concept, also expressed in Arabic, is of the man entering the woman's tent for the purposes of sex.

5 **now YHWH saw . . . evildoing:** In contrast to the refrain of Chapter 1, "God saw that it was good." **every form of their heart's planning:** This lengthy phrase indicates human imagination (Speiser: "every scheme that his mind devised"). "Heart" (Heb. *lev* or *levav*) often expresses the concept of "mind" in the Bible.

9 **righteous:** A term with legal connotations; "in the right" or "just." **righteous, whole:** Foreshadowing Avraham, of whom similar vocabulary will be used (17:1). **whole:** A term used of animals fit for sacrifice: "perfect" or "unblemished." In reference to human beings it may denote "whole-hearted."

11–12 **Now the earth . . . :** A poetic summary of the situation.

11 **before God:** In his sight.

12 **God saw the earth, and here: it had gone to ruin:** A bitter echo of 1:31, "Now God saw all that he had made,/ and here: it was exceedingly good!"

13 **has come before me:** Has been determined by me.

14 **Ark:** English as well as Hebrew etymology points to a box or chest, not strictly a boat. God, not human engineering, is the source of survival in the story. **gofer:** Identification unknown. **reeds:** Reading Heb. *kanim* for traditional text's *kenim* ("compartments").

and cover it within and without with a covering-of-pitch.

15 And this is how you are to make it:

Three hundred cubits the length of the Ark, fifty cubits its breadth, and thirty cubits its height.

16 A skylight you are to make for the Ark, finishing it to a cubit upward.

The entrance of the Ark you are to set in its side;

With a lower, a second, and a third deck you are to make it.

17 As for me,

here, I am about to bring on the Deluge, water upon the earth,

to bring ruin upon all flesh that has breath of life in it, from under the heavens,

all that is on earth will perish.

18 But I will establish my covenant with you:

you are to come into the Ark, you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you,

19 and from all living-things, from all flesh, you are to bring two from all into the Ark, to remain alive with you.

They are to be a male and a female each,

20 from fowl after their kind, from herd-animals after their kind, from all crawling things of the soil after their kind, two from all are to come to you, to remain alive.

21 As for you,

take for yourself from all edible-things that are eaten and gather it to you,

it shall be for you and for them, for eating.

22 Noah did it,

according to all that God commanded him, so he did.

7:1 YHWH said to Noah:

Come, you and all your household, into the Ark!

For you I have seen as righteous before me in this generation.

2 From all ritually pure animals you are to take seven and seven each, a male and his mate,

and from all the animals that are not pure, two each, a male and his mate,

- 3 and also from the fowl of the heavens, seven and seven  
each, male and female,  
to keep seed alive upon the face of all the earth.
- 4 For in yet seven days  
I will make it rain upon the earth for forty days and forty  
nights  
and will blot out all existing-things that I have made, from  
the face of the soil.
- 5 Noah did it, according to all that YHWH had commanded  
him.
- 6 Noah was six hundred years old when the Deluge occurred,  
water upon the earth;
- 7 and Noah came, his sons and his wife and his sons' wives  
with him, into the Ark before the waters of the Deluge.
- 8 From the pure animals and from the animals that are not  
pure and from the fowl and all that crawls about on the  
soil—
- 9 two and two each came to Noah, into the Ark, male and  
female,  
as God had commanded Noah.
- 

action directly affects the orderly and otherwise neutral functioning of nature.

There are striking parallels between the Flood narrative and the creation account of Chapter 1. Just as the animals were created, each “according to its kind,” their rescue, both in boarding and leaving the Ark,

15 **cubits:** A cubit equaled a man's forearm in length, about 17½ inches.

16 **skylight:** Hebrew obscure, including the end of the phrase.

17 **Deluge:** Heb. *mabbul*. Others suggest the more conventional word “Flood,” but the term may be an Assyrian loan-word.

18 **covenant:** An agreement or pact, most notably (in the Bible) one between God and individuals or between him and the people of Israel.

7:2 **ritually pure:** An anachronism, referring to later Israelite laws about sacrifice and eating. **seven and seven each:** The contradiction between this and 6:19 has led scholars to posit two different sources for the story. **male:** Lit. “a man.”

4 **in yet seven days:** Seven days from now. **forty:** Used in the Bible to denote long periods of time; also a favorite patterned number.

- 10 After the seven days it was  
that the waters of the Deluge were upon the earth.
- 11 In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second  
New-Moon, on the seventeenth day of the New-Moon,  
on that day:  
    then burst all the well-springs of the great Ocean  
    and the sluices of the heavens opened up.
- 12 The torrent was upon the earth for forty days and forty  
nights.
- 13 On that very day came Noah, and Shem, Ham, and Yefet,  
Noah's sons, Noah's wife and his three sons' wives with  
them, into the Ark,
- 14 they and all wildlife after their kind, all herd-animals after  
their kind, all crawling things that crawl upon the earth  
after their kind, all fowl after their kind, all  
chirping-things, all winged-things;
- 15 they came to Noah, into the Ark, two and two each from all  
flesh in which there is breath of life.
- 16 And those that came, male and female from all flesh they  
came,  
as God had commanded him.  
YHWH closed (the door) upon him.
- 17 The Deluge was forty days upon the earth.  
The waters increased and lifted the Ark, so that it was  
raised above the earth;
- 18 the waters swelled and increased exceedingly upon the  
earth, so that the Ark floated upon the face of the waters.
- 19 When the waters had swelled exceedingly, yes, exceedingly  
over the earth, all high mountains that were under all the  
heavens were covered.
- 20 Fifteen cubits upward swelled the waters, thus the  
mountains were covered.
- 21 Then perished all flesh that crawls about upon the earth—  
fowl, herd-animals, wildlife, and all swarming things that  
swarm upon the earth,  
and all human beings;

- 22 all that had rush or breath of life in their nostrils,  
all that were on firm ground, died.
- 23 He blotted out all existing-things that were on the face of  
the soil,  
from human to animal, to crawling thing and to fowl of the  
heavens,  
they were blotted out from the earth.  
Noah alone remained, and those who were with him in the  
Ark.
- 

is similarly worded. “Ocean” and the great “breath” which existed at creation (1:2) return here, the former to signify a lapse into chaos and the latter, the restoration of order and peace (7:11, 8:1). Finally, after the Flood (9:1–3) Noah is blessed in wording that recalls Adam’s blessing in 1:28–30. The world thus begins anew, with the implication of some hope for the future.

Repetition emphasizes other aspects of the story’s message. In general the word-stem “live” occurs constantly throughout the text, highlighting the rescue and renewal of life as well as its destruction. Noah’s obedience, another major theme, is indicated by variations on the phrase “according to all that God commanded him, so he did” (6:22). Of rhythmic, almost ritual-sounding import is the phrase “you and your sons and your wife and your sons’ wives.”

Our story has often been compared, with much justification, to the several Mesopotamian Flood accounts (e.g., in the *Gilgamesh* and *Atrahasis* epics), with which it shares a great deal of detail. At one time scholars

- 11 **then burst . . .** : Cassuto suggests that the poetic verses here and elsewhere in the Flood story are fragments of an Israelite epic. See also 9:11, 15. **well-springs . . . sluices**: The normal sources of rain function here without any restraint (Cassuto). **Ocean**: The world returns to the primeval chaos of 1:2.
- 16 **YHWH closed**: Another sign of God’s control over the events (and of his protection of Noah).
- 17–20 **increased . . . swelled and increased exceedingly. . . swelled exceedingly, yes, exceedingly. . . swelled**: The structure here mirrors the action: the surging and growing of the waters.
- 18 **swelled**: Lit. “grew mighty.” **floated**: Lit. “went.”
- 22 **firm ground**: Heb. *harava*, lit. “dry-land.” Hebrew has two words for “dry” (*harev* and *yavesh*), while English uses only one.
- 23 **blotted out**: Twice repeated, echoing God’s promise in 6:7.

24 The waters swelled upon the earth for a hundred and fifty days.

8:1 But God paid mind to Noah and all living-things, all the animals that were with him in the Ark,  
and God brought a breath-of-wind across the earth, so that the waters abated.

2 The well-springs of Ocean and the sluices of the heavens were dammed up,  
and the torrent from the heavens was held back.

3 The waters returned from upon the earth, continually advancing and returning,  
and the waters diminished at the end of a hundred and fifty days.

4 And the Ark came to rest in the seventh New-Moon, on the seventeenth day of the New-Moon, upon the mountains of Ararat.

5 Now the waters continued to advance and diminish until the tenth New-Moon.

On the tenth, on the first day of the New-Moon, the tops of the mountains could be seen.

6 At the end of forty days it was: Noah opened the window of  
7 the Ark that he had made,/ and sent out a raven;  
it went off, going off and returning, until the waters were dried up from upon the earth.

8 Then he sent out a dove from him, to see whether the waters had subsided from the face of the soil.

9 But the dove found no resting-place for the sole of her foot, so she returned to him into the Ark,  
for there was water upon the face of all the earth.

He sent forth his hand and took her, and brought her to him into the Ark.

10 Then he waited yet another seven days  
and sent out the dove yet again from the Ark.

11 The dove came back to him at eventime,  
and here—a freshly plucked olive leaf in her beak!  
So Noah knew  
that the waters had subsided from upon the earth.

- 12 Then he waited yet another seven days  
and sent out the dove,  
but she returned to him again no more.
- 13 And so it was in the six hundred and first year, in the  
beginning-month, on the first day of the New-Moon,  
that the waters left firm ground upon the earth.  
Noah removed the covering of the Ark and saw:  
here, the face of the soil was firm.
- 14 Now in the second New-Moon, on the twenty-seventh day  
of the New-Moon, the earth was completely dry.
- 15 God spoke to Noah, saying:  
16 Go out of the Ark, you and your wife, your sons and your  
sons' wives with you.  
17 All living-things that are with you, all flesh—fowl, animals,  
and all crawling things that crawl upon the earth,

---

were quick to concentrate on the parallels, but the differences are now recognized as being much more significant. In general one may say that in contrast to the earlier (Mesopotamian) versions the biblical one is unambiguous in both tone and intent. It has been placed in Genesis to exemplify a God who judges the world according to human behavior, punishes evil and rescues the righteous. This is a far cry from the earlier accounts, where the gods plan the destruction of the world for reasons that are unclear (or in one version, because mankind's noise is disturbing the sleep of the gods), and where the protagonist, Utnapishtim, is saved as the result of a god's favoritism without any moral judgments being passed.

- 8:1 **paid mind:** More than merely "remembered." **breath-of-wind:** Reminiscent of the "breath of God" at creation.
- 3,5 **advancing and returning. . . . advance and diminish:** Again, as in 7:17–20, the motion of the waters is suggested by means of sound.
- 7 **sent out:** Or "released."
- 8 **dove:** This bird is portrayed in the Bible as beautiful (even pure) and delicate. From this passage, of course, stems the popular use of the dove as the symbol of peace.
- 13 **left firm ground:** Or "were fully dried up" (see note to 7:22).

have them go out with you,  
that they may swarm on earth, that they may bear fruit and  
become many upon the earth.

18 So Noah went out, his sons, his wife, and his sons' wives  
with him,

19 all living-things—all crawling things, and all fowl, all that  
crawl about upon the earth,  
according to their clans they went out of the Ark.

20 Noah built a slaughter-site to YHWH.

He took from all pure animals and from all pure fowl  
and offered up offerings upon the slaughter-site.

21 Now YHWH smelled the soothing smell  
and YHWH said in his heart:

I will never doom the soil again on humankind's account,  
since what the human heart forms is evil from its youth;  
I will never again strike down all living-things, as I have  
done;

22 (never) again, all the days of the earth, shall  
sowing and harvest,  
cold and heat,  
summer and winter,  
day and night  
ever cease!

9:1 Now God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them:  
Bear fruit and be many and fill the earth!

2 Your fear, your dread shall be upon all the wildlife of the  
earth and upon all the fowl of the heavens,  
all that crawls on the soil and all the fish of the sea—  
they are given into your hand.

3 All things crawling about that live, for you shall they be, for  
eating,  
as with the green plants, I now give you all.

4 However: flesh with its life, its blood, you are not to eat!

5 However, too: for your blood, of your own lives, I will  
demand satisfaction—

from all wild-animals I will demand it,

and from humankind, from every man regarding his  
brother,  
demand satisfaction for human life.

- 6      Whoever now sheds human blood,  
by humans shall his blood be shed,  
for in God's image he made humankind.

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*Aftermath* (8:20–9:19): The passages immediately following the Flood narrative speak of a God who is remarkably receptive to a human kind of change. From having been “sorry” that he created mankind (6:6), he now evinces a change of heart about the entire issue of human evil, conceding mankind's imperfections (8:21). In a wonderfully structured declaration, where “never again” moves in position from the middle to the beginning of the phrase (8:21–22), God as it were chooses to restrain his own ability to radically disturb the processes of nature. Where later on in Genesis the human characters exhibit the capacity to change, here it is God himself.

The blessing in 9:1–3 establishes Noah as a kind of second Adam (and it might be noted that chronologically Noah is the first man born after Adam dies). It repeats the basic formulation of the blessing in 1:28–30, with an important exception: meat-eating is now to be allowed, as part of God's concession to human nature. Previously only the plant world had been accessible to humankind for food. However—and this very word punctuates the text twice in 9:4–5—there is to be an accounting for willful bloodshed, as if to suggest that the eating of meat is being permitted only under strict conditions. To underscore the importance of this concept, the section about bloodshed uses the vocabulary of creation: human beings are made “in the image of God.”

19 **clans**: Classifications.

20 **Slaughter-site**: Others use “altar.” Etymologically the word hearkens back to a time when such sites were used mainly for animal sacrifice; the Bible cites other uses such as libations and cereal offerings. **offered up**: The Hebrew verb (*'alo*) implies upward movement.

21 **smelled the soothing smell**: Conveyed by the sound in Hebrew, *va-yarah et re'ah ha-niho'ah*. **evil from its youth**: That is, evil already begins in what we might call adolescence. But Speiser renders it “from the start.”

22 **sowing and harvest . . .**: The solemn promise is expressed in verse.

9:6 **Whoever . . .**: A poem which plays on the sounds of “humankind” (*adam*) and “blood” (*dam*): *Shofekh dam ha-adam/ ba-adam damo yishafekh*. **by humans**: Or “for that human.”

- 7 As for you—bear fruit and be many, swarm on earth and become many on it!
- 8 God said to Noah and to his sons with him, saying:
- 9 As for me—here, I am about to establish my covenant with you and with your seed after you,
- 10 and with all living beings that are with you: fowl, herd-animals, and all the wildlife of the earth with you; all those going out of the Ark, of all the living-things of the earth.
- 11 I will establish my covenant with you:  
All flesh shall never be cut off again by waters of the Deluge,  
never again shall there be Deluge, to bring the earth to ruin!
- 12 And God said:  
This is the sign of the covenant which I set between me and you and all living beings that are with you, for ageless generations:
- 13 My bow I set in the clouds,  
so that it may serve as a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.
- 14 It shall be:  
when I becloud the earth with clouds  
and in the clouds the bow is seen,
- 15 I will call to mind my covenant  
that is between me and you and all living beings—all flesh:  
never again shall the waters become a Deluge, to bring all flesh to ruin!
- 16 When the bow is in the clouds,  
I will look at it,  
to call to mind the age-old covenant  
between God and all living beings—  
all flesh that is upon the earth.
- 17 God said to Noah:  
This is the sign of the covenant that I have established  
between me and all flesh that is upon the earth.
- 18 Noah's sons who went out of the Ark were Shem, Ham, and Yefet.

Now Ham is the father of Canaan.

19 These three were Noah's sons, and from these were scattered abroad all the earth-folk.

20 Now Noah was the first man of the soil; he planted a vineyard.

21 When he drank from the wine, he became drunk and exposed himself in the middle of his tent.

22 Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside.

23 Then Shem and Yefet took a cloak, they put it on the shoulders of the two of them, and walked backward, to cover their father's nakedness. —Their faces were turned backward, their father's nakedness they did not see.

With verses 8 and 9 the key concept of "covenant" appears for the first time in the Bible. It is accompanied, as is usual in the Bible, by a symbol or "sign" (in this case, the rainbow). We are led back to the creation story again, as other biblical texts speak of the Sabbath as a "sign of the covenant" between God and Israel (e.g., Ex. 31:12–17).

The sixfold repetition of the phrase "never again" provides a thematic unity in these passages.

*Drunkenness and Nakedness* (9:20–29): From the lofty poetry of God's blessings and promises, we encounter an all-too-brief description of a bizarre event. The soil, which evidently has not entirely shaken off its primeval curse, proves once again to be a source of trouble. The nature of the crime mentioned here ("seeing the father's nakedness") has been variously interpreted; Buber and others see in it a reference to the sexual "immorality" of the Canaanites, which the Israelites found particularly abhorrent. This would explain the emphasis on the *son* of the culprit in the story, rather than on the perpetrator.

A similar undistinguished ancestry is traced in Chapter 19, referring to the incestuous origins of Israel's neighbors and frequent enemies, the Moabites and Ammonites.

18 **Now Ham is the father of Canaan:** See repetition in the story to follow, verses 20–27.

24 Now when Noah awoke from his wine, it became known (to him) what his littlest son had done to him.

25 He said:

Cursed be Canaan,  
servant of servants may he be to his brothers!

26 And he said:

Blessed be YHWH, God of Shem,  
but may Canaan be servant to them!

27 May God extend/*yaft*

Yefet,  
let him dwell in the tents of Shem,  
but may Canaan be servant to them!

28 And Noah lived after the Deluge three hundred years and fifty years.

29 And all the days of Noah were nine hundred years and fifty years,  
then he died.

10:1 Now these are the begettings of the sons of Noah,  
Shem, Ham, and Yefet.  
Sons were born to them after the Deluge.

2 The Sons of Yefet are Gomer and Magog, Madai, Yavan and Tuval, Meshekh and Tiras.

3 The Sons of Gomer are Ashkenaz, Rifat, and Togarma.

4 The Sons of Yavan are Elisha and Tarshish, Cittites and Dodanites.

5 From these the seacoast nations were divided by their lands,  
each one after its own tongue:  
according to their clans, by their nations.

6 The Sons of Ham are Cush and Mitzrayim, Put and Canaan.

7 The Sons of Cush are Seva and Havila, Savta, Ra'ma, and Savtekha;  
the Sons of Ra'ma—Sheva and Dedan.

8 Cush begot Nimrod; he was the first mighty man on earth.

9 He was a mighty hunter before YHWH,

therefore the saying is:

Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before YHWH.

- 10 His kingdom, at the beginning, was Bavel, and Erekh,  
 Accad and Calne, in the land of Shinar;  
 11/12 from this land Ashur went forth and built Nineveh—along  
 with the city squares and Calah,/ and Resen between  
 Nineveh and Calah—that is the great city.  
 13 Mitzrayim begot the Ludites, the Anamites, the Lehavites,  
 14 the Naftuhites,/ the Patrusites, and the Casluhites, from  
 where the Philistines come, and the Caftorites.

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*The Table of the Nations* (10): Genesis, with its typically ancient Near Eastern emphasis on “begettings,” now traces the development of humanity from the sons of Noah. The key formula throughout is “their lands, their nations.” Commentators have noted numerical unity in the list, citing a total of seventy nations (once repetitions are omitted) laid out in multiples of seven. That number, as we have indicated, represents the concept of totality and perfection in the Bible. Thus the stage is set for the Babel story of the next chapter, with its condemnation of man’s attempt to forestall the divinely willed “scattering” into a well-ordered world.

Many of the names in this chapter have been identified (see Speiser), but some are still not known with certainty. Israel is conspicuous in its absence; despite the biblical narrative’s ability to trace Israel’s origins, those origins are meant to be seen not solely in biological terms but rather in God’s choice. Similarly, Israel arises from women who begin as barren—thus pointing to divine intervention in history, rather than the perfectly normal account that we have here.

24 **littlest**: Or “youngest,” difficult in the light of verse 18.

26 **to them**: Others use “to him.”

10:2 **Sons**: Here, and later, it may mean “descendants.”

4 **Dodanites**: Some read “Rodanites,” following I Chron. 1:7.

6 **Mitzrayim**: The biblical name for Egypt (the modern Egyptian name is *Misr*).

8 **mighty man**: Three times here; clearly Nimrod was well known as an ancient hero.

10 **Calne**: Some read *culanna*, “all of them.”

11 **city squares**: Some read this as a name, “Rehovot-Ir.”

14 **Casluhites . . . Caftorites**: Some reverse the order; the Bible often speaks of the origins of the Philistines in Caftor (Crete).

- 15/16 Canaan begot Tzidon his firstborn and Het,/ along with the  
17 Yevusite, the Amorite and the Girgashite,/ the Hivvite,  
18 the Arkite and the Sinite,/ the Arvadite, the Tzemarite  
and the Hamatite.

Afterward the Canaanite clans were scattered abroad.

- 19 And the Canaanite territory went from Tzidon, then as you  
come toward Gerar, as far as Gaza, then as you come  
toward Sedom and Amora, Adma, and Tzevoyim, as far  
as Lasha.
- 20 These are the Sons of Ham after their clans, after their  
tongues, by their lands, by their nations.
- 21 (Children) were also born to Shem,  
the father of all the Sons of Ever (and) Yefet's older  
brother.
- 22 The Sons of Shem are Elam and Ashur, Arpakhshad, Lud,  
and Aram.
- 23 The Sons of Aram are Utz and Hul, Geter and Mash.
- 24 Arpakhshad begot Shelah, Shelah begot Ever.
- 25 Two sons were born to Ever:  
the name of the first one was Peleg/Splitting, for in his days  
the earth-folk were split up,  
and his brother's name was Yoktan.
- 26/27 Yoktan begot Almodad and Shelef, Hatzarmavet and Yera,/
- 28/29 Hadoram, Uzal and Dikla,/ Oval, Avimael and Sheva,/
- Ofir, Havila, and Yovav—all these are the Sons of  
Yoktan.
- 30 Now their settlements went from Mesha, then as you come  
toward Sefar, to the mountain-country of the east.
- 31 These are the Sons of Shem after their clans, after their  
tongues, by their lands, after their nations.
- 32 These are the clan-groupings of the Sons of Noah, after  
their begettings, by their nations.  
From these the nations were divided on earth after the  
Deluge.

11:1 Now all the earth was of one language and one set-of-words.

- 2 And it was when they migrated to the east that they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there.
  - 3 They said, each man to his fellow:  
Come-now! Let us bake bricks and let us burn them well-burnt!  
So for them brick-stone was like building-stone, and raw-bitumen was for them like red-mortar.
  - 4 Now they said:  
Come-now! Let us build ourselves a city and a tower, its top in the heavens,  
and let us make ourselves a name,  
lest we be scattered over the face of all the earth!
  - 5 But YHWH came down to look over the city and the tower that the humans were building.
- 

*The Unfinished Citadel* (11:1–9): At its most obvious, in an isolated context, this famous story is about the overweening pride of man, as represented by his technology. God’s actions here recall the ending of the garden story, where humanity was also within reach of the divine.

Yet more is involved than a threat. Buber felt that this episode has been inserted at this point to show that mankind has failed again, as at the time of the Flood. It has not spread out and divided into nations, as in Chapter 10. The failure paves the way for a new divine plan, which is to be realized through one man (Avraham) and his descendants.

Structurally, the story is a tiny literary masterpiece. It utilizes numerous plays on sound which make meaningful and often ironic linkages between sections and ideas in the text. Most significant is how the general message—that God’s response occurs in exactly the same terms as the human challenge (i.e., divine justice)—is transmitted by means of form. Fokkelman has provided a detailed study; it will suffice here to indicate only the outline. The divine “Come-now!” of verse 7 clearly stands as an answer to mankind’s identical cry in verses 3 and 4. In

15 **Yevusite**, etc.: Collective names.

11:1 **language**; Lit. “lip.”

3 **so . . . brick-stone . . .** : An explanation of Mesopotamian building techniques for the Hebrew audience. The text plays on sound (*levena . . . le-aven, hemer . . . la-homer*). **raw-bitumen**: Asphalt, used for making cement.

4 **make . . . a name**: That is, make sure that we and our works will endure.

- 6 YHWH said:  
Here, (they are) one people with one language for them all,  
and this is merely the first of their doings—  
now there will be no barrier for them in all that they devise  
to do!
- 7 Come-now! Let us go down and there let us baffle their  
language,  
so that no man will understand the language of his fellow.
- 8 So YHWH scattered them from there over the face of all  
the earth,  
and they had to stop building the city.
- 9 Therefore its name was called Babel/Babble,  
for there YHWH baffled the language of all the earth-folk,  
and from there, YHWH scattered them over the face of all  
the earth.
- 10 These are the begettings of Shem:  
Shem was a hundred years old, then he begot Arpakhshad,  
two years after the Deluge,
- 11 and Shem lived after he begot Arpakhshad five hundred  
years, and begot other sons and daughters.
- 12 Arpakhshad lived thirty-five years, then he begot Shelah,
- 13 and Arpakhshad lived after he begot Shelah three years and  
four hundred years, and begot other sons and daughters.
- 14 Shelah lived thirty years, then he begot Ever,
- 15 and Shelah lived after he begot Ever three years and four  
hundred years, and begot other sons and daughters.
- 16 When Ever had lived thirty-four years, he begot Peleg,
- 17 and Ever lived after he begot Peleg thirty years and four  
hundred years, and begot other sons and daughters.
- 18 When Peleg had lived thirty years, he begot Re'u,
- 19 and Peleg lived after he begot Re'u nine years and two  
hundred years, and begot other sons and daughters.
- 20 When Re'u had lived thirty-two years, he begot Serug,
- 21 and Re'u lived after he begot Serug seven years and two  
hundred years, and begot other sons and daughters.
- 22 When Serug had lived thirty years, he begot Nahor,
- 23 and Serug lived after he begot Nahor two hundred years,  
and begot other sons and daughters.

24 When Nahor had lived twenty-nine years, he begot Terah,  
 25 and Nahor lived after he begot Terah nineteen years and a  
 hundred years, and begot other sons and daughters.  
 26 When Terah had lived seventy years, he begot Avram,  
 Nahor, and Haran.

27 Now these are the begettings of Terah:

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addition man, who congregated in order to establish a “name” and to avoid being “scattered over the face of all the earth” (v.4), is contravened by the action of God, resulting in the ironic name “Babble” and a subsequent “scattering” of humanity (v.9). The text is thus another brilliant example of biblical justice, a statement about a world view in which the laws of justice and morality are as neatly balanced as we like to think the laws of nature are.

There is an important cultural background to the story. “Shinar” refers to Mesopotamia, and the “tower,” undoubtedly, to the ubiquitous *ziggurratu* (now unearthed by archeologists) which served as man-made sacred mountains (i.e., temples). By portraying an unfinished tower, by dispersing the builders, and by in essence making fun of the mighty name of Babylon, the text functions effectively to repudiate the culture from which the people of Israel sprang (Avram’s “Ur” of 11:28 was probably the great Mesopotamian metropolis). From Chapter 12 on, a new world view is created.

*Noah to Avram* (11:10-32): Here are enumerated another ten generations, making the orderly connection between the origins of the world (Noah was viewed as a second Adam) and the origins of the people of Israel. The life spans are considerably shorter than those of Chapter 5, yet some sort of careful number scheme seems evident here as well (see Cassuto).

Beginning with verse 26 we are introduced to Avram, with little hint of what is to come in his momentous life. For the moment he is only a son, a brother, and a husband, and a man whose early life is marked principally by the death of the old world (Haran and Terah), with little hope for the new (his wife is barren).

10 **two years after the Deluge:** Possibly a typical popular way of telling time (see Amos 1:1, “two years after the earthquake”).

26 **Avram:** Trad. English “Abram.”

- Terah begot Avram, Nahor, and Haran;  
and Haran begot Lot.
- 28 Haran died in the presence of Terah his father in the land  
of his kindred, in Ur of the Chaldeans.
- 29 Avram and Nahor took themselves wives;  
the name of Avram's wife was Sarai,  
the name of Nahor's wife was Milca—daughter of Haran,  
father of Milca and father of Yisca.
- 30 Now Sarai was barren, she had no child.
- 31 Terah took Avram his son and Lot son of Haran, his son's  
son, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, wife of Avram his son,  
they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans, to go to the  
land of Canaan.  
But when they had come as far as Harran, they settled  
there.
- 32 And the days of Terah were five years and two hundred  
years,  
then Terah died,  
in Harran.

- 28 **in the presence of Terah his father:** During his father's lifetime. **Chaldeans:** An anachronism; see Speiser.
- 30 **barren, she had no child:** This doubling is characteristic of biblical style (formal poetry in the Bible uses parallelism of lines).
- 31 **Harran:** An important city and center of moon worship, like Ur. The name means "crossroads."

# The Patriarchal Narratives

## (PARTS II–IV)

THE STORIES about the fathers and mothers of Israel, as a collection, are almost contrapuntal in their richness. Life experiences are repeated and common themes recur; yet at the same time there is a remarkable variety of personalities.

Two prominent themes throughout are God's promises (of land and descendants) and his blessing. The texts revolve around the question of whether and how God will fulfill his promises, and how man will effect the transfer of the blessing. Each generation portrayed in the narratives must deal with the inherent tensions raised by these questions, since their resolution does not occur easily.

The stories are also marked by each figure's struggle to develop a concept of the religious life, of "walking in accord with God." Each one carves out his own distinct path, to arrive at a mature understanding of what it means to be a father of the people of Israel. In order to bring about such an understanding, God apparently "tests" them in both obvious and more oblique ways, often against a backdrop of bitter sibling rivalry. One also observes a physical unsettledness about the Patriarchs' quest; only Yitzhak is spared the wanderings that occur so regularly in the stories.

Rather interestingly, although the texts purport to be about "fathers," it is God himself who most consistently fits that role for the characters. God acts *in loco parentis* for each of the Patriarchs, always, significantly, after the loss of the human father. He first appears to Avraham after the death of Terah; to Yitzhak after that of Avraham; to Yaakov after he leaves home (and a seemingly dying father); and he helps Yosef directly, after he has left his father's home.

Numbers play an important role in the Patriarchal stories, as they did in Part I. It has been pointed out (see Sarna) that the life spans of the Patriarchs fit into a highly ordered pattern. Avraham lives for 175 years,

equaling  $7 \times 5^2$ ; Yitzhak, for 180 years, equaling  $5 \times 6^2$ ; and Yaakov, for 147 years, or  $3 \times 7^2$ . This is unmistakably a purposeful scheme, meant to convey that human history is orderly and meaningful. Similarly an examination of the stories reveals that Avraham lives for 75 years in the lifetime of his father and 75 years in the lifetime of his son, while Yaakov spends 20 years away from his father, with Yosef roughly following suit in the next generation.

Last, it should be noted that the Patriarchal stories in various details anticipate the later Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. The specific references will be mentioned in the Notes.

# PART II Avraham

## (12–25:18)

**A**LTHOUGH Avraham is the biological father of Israel, the diverse traditions about him which have been collected and connected to form a cycle of stories give evidence of much more. The cycle portrays an active *Homo religiosus* who converses with God, sometimes with an air of doubt and questioning, who proclaims God's name at various sacred sites, who is concerned about justice and the treatment of the oppressed, and who makes dramatic life decisions without flinching. The stories thus reveal struggle, despite the fact that Avraham often appears to be the "perfect" man, always obeying God's bidding and prospering.

Buber, noting the unifying effect of the verb "see" throughout the cycle, understood Avraham as the father of the Prophets of Israel (formerly called "seers"). He also viewed the cycle as based around the series of tests that Avraham must undergo, tests quite different, we might add, from the labors of Hercules and other such ancient challenges.

Other than "see," a number of leading-words launch the major concerns of the Patriarchs: "bless," "seed," and "land." At the same time the cycle contains previously encountered motifs, albeit with interesting refinements: punishment for sin (this time, with man's questioning), intimacy with God (here through visions), and sibling rivalry (with more complex results than murder). Above all we note the singling out of one man to perform the will of God, a man very different from the rather passive Noah.

Avraham stands at the core of the entire book of Genesis, as his experiences will in many ways be reflected in those who follow him. At the core of both the book and the cycle looms the disturbing Chapter 22, which brings together and resolves, for the moment, the major themes encountered so far.

12:1 YHWH said to Avram:

Go-you-forth  
from your land,  
from your kindred,  
from your father's house,  
to the land that I will let you see.

2 I will make a great nation of you  
and will give-you-blessing  
and will make your name great.  
Be a blessing!

3 I will bless those who bless you,  
he who reviles you, I will curse.  
All the clans of the soil will find blessing through you!

4 Avram went, as YHWH had spoken to him, and Lot went  
with him.

And Avram was five years and seventy years old when he  
went out of Harran.

5 Avram took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother's son, all  
their property that they had gained, and the persons  
whom they had made-their-own in Harran,  
and they went out to go to the land of Canaan.  
When they came to the land of Canaan,

6 Avram passed through the land, as far as the Place of  
Shekhem, as far as the Oak of Moreh.  
Now the Canaanite was then in the land.

7 YHWH was seen by Avram and said:

I give this land to your seed!

He built a slaughter-site there to YHWH who had been  
seen by him.

8 He moved on from there to the mountain-country, east of  
Bet-El,

and spread his tent, Bet-El toward the sea and Ai toward  
the east.

There he built a slaughter-site to YHWH  
and called out the name of YHWH.

9 Then Avram journeyed on, continually journeying to the  
Negev/ the Southland.

- 10 Now there was a famine in the land,  
and Avram went down to Egypt, to sojourn there,  
for the famine was heavy in the land.
- 11 It was when he came near to Egypt that he said to Sarai his  
wife:  
Now here, I know well that you are a woman fair to look  
at.
- 12 It will be, when the Egyptians see you and say: She is his  
wife,  
that they will kill me, but you they will allow to live.
- 

*The Call and the Journey* (12:1-9): The Avraham cycle begins decisively, with a command from God to leave the past behind and go to an unnamed land. Prominent in this speech, clearly, is the concept of blessing, which will be realized by the gifts of land (Canaan) and seed (Yitzhak, the son).

The classic mythological motif of the journey, where the hero meets such dangers as monsters and giants, has here been avoided. All that the text wishes us to know about is God's speech and Avram's immediate obedience; as in Chapter 22, all other details of the actual trip have been omitted.

*The Wife—I* (12:10-20): Almost immediately upon his arrival in the promised land Avram is forced to leave it. It will be his son Yitzhak's task to remain there on a more permanent basis.

This is the first of three such stories which are practically identical (see Chapters 20 and 26). All pose a challenge for the interpreter. An honored

12:1 **kindred**: Others use "birthplace."

3 **find blessing**: Or "seek to be blessed (as you)."

5 **property . . . gained**: Heb. *rekhusam . . . rakhashu*.

6 **Place**: Possibly with the implication of "sacred place." **Oak**: Some read "valley." **Moreh**: Some, like Buber, interpret this as "sage." **the Canaanite**: The peoples inhabiting the land at the time of the Israelite conquest under Joshua; see also 13:7.

7 **was seen**: Others use "appeared to," which is more comfortable in English. "See" has been kept here as a leading word in the Avraham cycle.

8 **toward the sea**: West.

10 **sojourn**: To reside temporarily, as an alien. **heavy**: Severe.

- 13 Pray say that you are my sister  
so that it may go well with me on your account, that I  
myself may live thanks to you.
- 14 It was when Avram came to Egypt, that the Egyptians saw  
how exceedingly fair the woman was;
- 15 when Pharaoh's courtiers saw her, they praised her to  
Pharaoh,  
and the woman was taken away into Pharaoh's house.
- 16 It went well with Avram on her account,  
sheep and oxen, he-asses, servants and maids, she-asses and  
camels, became his.
- 17 But YHWH plagued Pharaoh with great plagues, and also  
his house, because of Sarai, Avram's wife.
- 18 Pharaoh had Avram called, and said:  
What is this that you have done to me!  
Why did you not tell me that she is your wife?
- 19 Why did you say: She is my sister?  
—So I took her for myself as a wife.  
But now, here is your wife, take her and go!
- 20 So Pharaoh put men in charge of him, who escorted him  
and his wife and all that was his.
- 13:1 Avram traveled up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that  
was his, and Lot with him, to the Southland.
- 2 And Avram was exceedingly heavily laden with livestock,  
with silver and with gold.
- 3 He went on his journeyings from the Southland as far as  
Bet-El, as far as the place where his tent had been at the  
first, between Bet-El and Ai,
- 4 to the place of the slaughter-site that he had made there at  
the beginning.  
There Avram called out the name of YHWH.
- 5 Now also Lot, who had gone with Avram, had sheep and  
oxen and tents.
- 6 And the land could not support them, to settle together,  
for their property was so great that they were not able to  
settle together.

7 So there was a quarrel between the herdsmen of Avram's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock.

Now the Canaanite and the Perizzite were then settled in the land.

8 Avram said to Lot:

Pray let there be no quarreling between me and you,  
between my herdsmen and your herdsmen,  
for we are brother men!

man of God seeks to save his own skin by passing his wife off as his sister; in each case the Patriarch emerges safely and with increased wealth.

Speiser has tried to use the analogy of Hurrian (i.e., from Harran) law in which a wife can be elevated to the status of "sister" as one element in the expansion of her status. The legal background, however, is unclear and may not be decisive here. Coming as it does after God's promise to biologically found "a great nation" (v.2) through Avram, the story in its first version is probably best understood as an example of God's protection not only of the key male figure, but of the Matriarch as well. Harming Sarai, or even the threat of violating her sexuality, brings with it divine punishment. In addition the story also enables Avram to expand his wealth—itself a sign of God's favor and the Patriarch's importance or "weightiness" (see Polzin).

*Lot; The Land* (13): We return to the theme of the land. Not for the last time, Avram's nephew Lot is used as a foil. Their "parting" shows how Lot makes a bad choice—the "wicked and sinful" area of Sodom and Amora—while Avram settles "in the land of Canaan," which had been promised to him. From here (vv.14ff.), Avram is given God's twofold promise again, with that of descendants being spelled out more vividly this time.

This section is linked to the previous one by the repetition of the phrase "he and his wife and all that was his."

15 **Pharaoh:** Heb. *Par'o*. This is an Egyptian title, "(Lord of) the Great House," and not a name.

13:2 **heavily laden:** Rich.

8 **brother men:** Relatives.

- 9 Is not all the land before you?  
 Pray part from me!  
 If to the left, then I go to the right,  
 if to the right, then I to the left.
- 10 Lot lifted up his eyes and saw all the plain of the Jordan—  
 how well-watered was it all, before YHWH brought ruin  
 upon Sedom and Amora,  
 like YHWH's garden, like the land of Egypt, as you come  
 toward Tzo'ar.
- 11 So Lot chose for himself all the plain of the Jordan.  
 Lot journeyed eastward, and they parted, each man from  
 the other:
- 12 Avram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled in  
 the cities of the plain, pitching-his-tent near Sedom.
- 13 Now the men of Sedom were exceedingly wicked and sinful  
 before YHWH.
- 14 YHWH said to Avram, after Lot had parted from him:  
 Pray lift up your eyes and see from the place where you are,  
 northward, southward, eastward, seaward:
- 15 indeed, all the land that you see, I give it to you  
 and to your seed, for the ages.
- 16 I will make your seed like the dust of the ground,  
 so that if a man were able to measure the dust of the  
 ground, so too could your seed be measured.
- 17 Up, walk about through the land in its length and in its  
 breadth,  
 for I give it to you.
- 18 Avram moved-his-tent and came and settled by the oaks of  
 Mamre, which are by Hevron.  
 There he built a slaughter-site to YHWH.
- 14:1 Now it was in the days of Amrafel king of Shinar, Aryokh  
 king of Ellasar, Kedorla'omer king of Elam, and Tidal  
 king of Goyim:
- 2 They prepared for battle against Bera king of Sedom, Birsha  
 king of Amora, Shinav king of Adma, Shemever king of  
 Tzevoyim, and the king of Bela—that is now Tzo'ar.
- 3 All these joined together in the valley of  
 Siddim/Limestone—that is now the Salt Sea.

- 4 For twelve years they had been subservient to  
Kedorla'omer,  
and in the thirteenth year they had revolted,  
5 but then in the fourteenth year came Kedorla'omer and the  
kings who were with him,  
they struck the Refaites in Ashterot-Karnayim, the Zuzites  
6 in Ham, the Emites in Shaveh-Kiryatayim, and the/  
Horites in their mountain-country of Se'ir near El Paran,  
which is by the wilderness.  
7 As they returned, they came to En Mishpat/Judgment  
Spring—that is now Kadesh,  
and struck all the territory of the Amalekites and also the  
Amorites, who were settled in Hatzatzon-Tamar.

*War and Rescue* (14): Abruptly Avram is presented in a new light: that of successful warrior (see Muffs). Consistent with his character as we will come to know it, he stands by his kinsman, acts intrepidly, and refuses the spoils of war. Equally important, he is respected by foreigners, a theme will return both in Genesis and later. Perhaps this very different story has been included here as part of the early sections of the cycle in order to establish Avram's status and stature. He is no longer merely a wanderer but well on the road to becoming a powerful local figure.

Whether the events described in this chapter are historical or part of an elaborate symbolic or mythical scheme has been the subject of debate among biblical scholars. The issue, barring unexpected archeological finds, is likely to remain unsolved.

The story is constructed around a geographical framework, using the formula “—that is now x—” to identify older sites for a contemporary audience. The one place which is *not* identified, the “Shalem” of verse 18, may well be Jerusalem. If so, this would substantiate the city's claim to holiness. Historically it was not conquered until King David's reign in the tenth century B.C.E.

9 **before you**: Possibly a legal term concerning boundaries. **left . . . right**: North and south.

10 **YHWH brought ruin**: See Chapter 19. **Sedom and Amora**: Trad. English “Sodom and Gomorrah.”

14 **seaward**: Westward.

14:3 **the Salt Sea**: The Dead Sea.

- 8 Then out marched the king of Sedom, the king of Amora,  
the king of Adma, the king of Tzevoyim, and the king of  
Bela—that is now Tzo'ar;  
they set-their-ranks against them in battle in the valley of  
Siddim,
- 9 against Kedorla'omer king of Elam, Tidal king of Goyim,  
Amrafel king of Shinar, and Aryokh king of Ellasar—  
four kings against the five.
- 10 Now the valley of Siddim is pit after pit of bitumen,  
and when the kings of Sedom and Amora fled, they flung  
themselves therein,  
while those who remained fled to the mountain-country.
- 11 Now they took all the property of Sedom and Amora and all  
their food, and went away,
- 12 and they took Lot and all his property—the son of Avram's  
brother—and went away,  
for he had settled in Sedom.
- 13 One who escaped came and told Avram the Hebrew—  
he was dwelling by the Oaks of Mamre the Amorite,  
brother of Eshcol and brother of Aner,  
they were Avram's covenant-allies.
- 14 When Avram heard that his brother had been taken  
prisoner,  
he drew out his retainers, his house-born slaves, eighteen  
and three hundred, and went in pursuit as far as Dan.
- 15 He split up (his forces) against them in the night, he and  
his servants, and struck them and pursued them as far as  
Hova, which is to the north of Damascus.
- 16 But he returned all the property, and he also returned his  
brother Lot and his property, and also the women and the  
other people.
- 17 The king of Sedom went out to meet him upon his return  
from the strike against Kedorla'omer and against the  
kings that were with him, to the valley of Shaveh—that is  
now the King's Valley.
- 18 Now Malki-Tzedek, king of Shalem, brought out bread and  
wine,

- for he was priest of God Most-High,  
 19 and gave him blessing and said:  
 Blessed be Avram by God Most-High,  
 Founder of Heaven and Earth!  
 20 And blessed be God Most-High,  
 who has delivered your oppressors into your hand!  
 He gave him a tenth of everything.
- 21 The king of Sedom said to Avram:  
 Give me the persons, and the property take for yourself.  
 22 Avram said to the king of Sedom:  
 I raise my hand in the presence of YHWH, God  
 Most-High,  
 Founder of Heaven and Earth,  
 23 if from a thread to a sandal-strap—if I should take from  
 anything that is yours . . . !  
 So that you should not say: I made Avram rich.  
 24 Nothing for me!  
 Only what the lads have consumed,  
 and the share of the men who went with me—Aner, Eshcol,  
 and Mamre,  
 let them take their share.
- 

- 10 **bitumen:** Asphalt. **flung themselves:** Others use “fell.”  
 12 **—the son of Avram’s brother—:** The Hebrew places the phrase after  
 “property,” not after “Lot,” as would be comfortable in English. **for he**  
**had settled:** The story abounds in similar explanatory phrases, which could  
 almost be put in parentheses.  
 14 **brother:** Kinsman.  
 15 **North:** lit., “left.”  
 18 **Malki-Tzedek:** Trad. English “Melchizedek.” The name is a Hebrew one,  
 and the character appears as if from nowhere. **Shalem:** Identified with the  
 later Jerusalem. **God Most-High:** Heb. *El Elyon*.  
 20 **a tenth:** Like the tithe later given to Israelite priests.  
 22 **I raise my hand:** I swear.  
 23 **from a thread to a sandal-strap:** As in “from A to Z,” or “anything at all.”  
 24 **lads:** Servants.

- 15:1 After these event YHWH's word came to Avram in a vision,  
saying:  
Be not afraid, Avram,  
I am a delivering-shield to you,  
your reward is exceedingly great.
- 2 Avram said:  
My Lord, YHWH,  
what would you give me—  
for I am going (to die) disgraced,  
and the Son Domestic of My House is Damaskan Eliezer.
- 3 And Avram said further:  
Here, to me you have not given seed,  
here, the Son of My House must be my heir.
- 4 But here, YHWH's word (came) to him, saying:  
This one shall not be heir to you,  
rather, the one that goes out from your own body, he shall  
be heir to you.
- 5 He brought him outside and said:  
Pray look toward the heavens and count the stars,  
can you count them?  
And he said to him:  
So shall your seed be.
- 6 Now he trusted in YHWH,  
and he deemed it as righteousness on his part.
- 7 Now he said to him:  
I am YHWH  
who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans  
to give you this land, to inherit it.
- 8 But he said:  
My Lord, YHWH,  
by what shall I know that I will inherit it?
- 9 He said to him:  
Fetch me a calf of three, a she-goat of three, a ram of three,  
a turtle-dove, and a fledgling.
- 10 He fetched him all these.

- He halved them down the middle, putting each one's half  
toward its fellow,  
but the birds he did not halve.
- 11 Vultures descended upon the carcasses,  
but Avram drove them back.
- 12 Now it was, when the sun was setting,  
that deep slumber fell upon Avram—  
and here, fright and great darkness falling upon him!
- 

*The Covenant between the Pieces* (15): Amid scenes of great drama and almost mystery, a number of significant motifs are presented: (1) Avram's expressions of doubt that God will keep his promise about descendants (thus heightening the tension and final miracle of Yitzhak's birth); (2) the linking of the Patriarch to the event of the Exodus centuries later; and (3) the "cutting" of a covenant, in a manner well known in the ancient world. This last motif, especially with its setting of "great darkness" and "night-blackness," takes Avram far beyond the earlier figure of Noah into a special and fateful relationship with God.

- 15:1 **YHWH's word came:** A formula often used by the Prophets. Avram is portrayed as their spiritual ancestor (Buber).
- 2 **disgraced:** Heb. *ariri*; B-R uses "bare-of-children." **Son Domestic . . . Damascan:** Hebrew difficult. The translation here reflects the play on sound (Heb. "*ben meshek . . . dammesek*").
- 3 **Son of My House:** The chief servant, who could inherit the estate in certain circumstances. Note the play on "son": the Hebrew here is *ben beti*, while *ben* alone means "son." **heir:** Three times here, indicating Avram's main concern.
- 6 **he deemed it:** "He" refers to God.
- 7 **who brought you out:** Like the later "I am YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Ex. 20:2). The language is undoubtedly intentional.
- 8 **But he said:** Avram, having just demonstrated trust in verse 6, now expresses deep doubt.
- 9 **of three:** I.e., three years old, and presumably mature and ritually fit for sacrifice.
- 12 **deep slumber:** Not the conventional sleep, it is almost always sent by God in the Bible (see 2:21, for example). The result here is "fright and great darkness."

- 13 And he said to Avram:  
You must know, yes, know  
that your seed will be sojourners in a land not theirs;  
they will put them in servitude and afflict them  
for four hundred years.
- 14 But the nation to which they are in servitude—I will bring  
judgment on them,  
and after that they will go out with great property.
- 15 As for you, you will go to your fathers in peace;  
you will be buried at a good ripe-age.
- 16 But in the fourth generation they will return here,  
for the punishment of the Amorite has not been paid-in-full  
heretofore.
- 17 Now it was, when the sun had set,  
that there was night-blackness,  
and here, a smoking oven, a fiery torch  
that crossed between those pieces.
- 18 On that day  
YHWH cut a covenant with Avram,  
saying: I give this land to your seed,  
from the River of Egypt to the Great River, the river  
Euphrates,
- 19 the Kenite and the Kenizzite and the Kadmonite,  
20 and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Refaites,  
21 and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Girgashite and  
the Yevusite.
- 16:1 Now Sarai, Avram's wife, had not borne him (children).  
She had an Egyptian maid—her name was Hagar.
- 2 Sarai said to Avram:  
Now here, YHWH has obstructed me from bearing;  
pray come in to my maid,  
perhaps I may be built-up-with-sons through her!  
Avram hearkened to Sarai's voice:
- 3 Sarai, Avram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian-woman, her  
maid,  
at the end of ten years of Avram's being settled in the land  
of Canaan,

- and gave her to her husband Avram as a wife for him.
- 4 He came in to Hagar, and she became pregnant.  
But when she saw that she was pregnant, her mistress  
became of light worth in her eyes.
- 5 Sarai said to Avram:  
The wrong done me is upon you!  
I myself gave my maid into your bosom,  
but now that she sees that she is pregnant, I have become of  
light worth in her eyes.  
May YHWH see-justice-done between me and you!
- 

*The Firstborn Son* (16): In the face of Sarai's inability to bear children, Avram is given the legitimate option of producing an heir through her maid, Hagar. Somewhat embarrassing to later interpreters, this practice was nevertheless common in the ancient Near East (see also 30:3ff., 30:9ff.). Hagar abuses her temporarily exalted position (as her son Yishmael apparently does in a parallel story, in Chapter 21), but is saved by God's intervention. The motif of "affliction" is continued from Chapter 15 (here, in vv.6, 9, and 11); also mentioned three times is God's "hearkening" (hence the name Yishmael/God Harkens). Buber understood this vocabulary to allude to the Exodus story, which in its early chapters uses the same terms.

Although Yishmael is not ultimately the chosen heir, he is nonetheless protected by God (see 21:20) and is eventually made into "a great nation" (17:20), as befits a child of Avram.

- 13 **afflict**: Looking toward the "affliction" of the Israelites in Egypt (Ex. 1:11, 12).
- 15 **ripe-age**: Lit. "grayness" or "hoariness."
- 16 **But in the fourth generation . . .**: God here speaks of the future conquest of Canaan by Avram's descendants. The natives (here termed "Amorites") are viewed as having forfeited their right to the land by their immorality (see Lev. 18:25–8).
- 18 **cut**: Concluded; the usage is influenced by the act of cutting animals by the parties involved, as in this story.
- 19 **the Kenite . . .**: Canaanite tribes, here presented as a round ten in number.
- 16:2 **built-up-with-sons**: Heb. *ibbane*, a play on *bano* (build) and *ben* (son).
- 3 **wife**: Or "concubine."
- 4 **became of light worth in her eyes**: A Hebrew idiom. *New Jewish Version*: "was lowered in her esteem."

- 6 Avram said to Sarai:  
Here, your maid is in your hand, deal with her however  
seems good in your eyes.  
Sarai afflicted her, so that she had to flee from her.
- 7 But YHWH's messenger found her by a spring of water in  
the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur.
- 8 He said:  
Hagar, Sarai's maid, whence do you come, whither are you  
going?  
She said:  
I am fleeing from Sarai my mistress.
- 9 YHWH's messenger said to her:  
Return to your mistress and let yourself be afflicted under  
her hand!
- 10 And YHWH's messenger said to her:  
I will make your seed many, yes, many, it will be too many  
to count!
- 11 And YHWH's messenger said to her:  
Here, you are pregnant,  
you will bear a son;  
call his name: Yishmael/God Harkens,  
for God has hearkened to your being afflicted.
- 12 He shall be a wild-ass of a man,  
his hand against all, hand of all against him,  
yet in the presence of all his brothers shall he dwell.
- 13 Now she called the name of YHWH, the one who was  
speaking to her:  
You God of Seeing!  
For she said:  
Have I actually gone on seeing here  
after his seeing me?
- 14 Therefore the well was called:  
Well of the Living-One Who-Sees-Me.  
Here, it is between Kadesh and Bered.
- 15 Hagar bore Avram a son,  
and Avram called the name of the son whom Hagar bore:  
Yishmael.
- 16 Avram was eighty years and six years when Hagar bore  
Yishmael to Avram.

- 17:1 Now when Avram was ninety years and nine years,  
 YHWH was seen by Avram and said to him:  
 I am God Shaddai.  
 Walk in my presence! And be whole!  
 2 I set my covenant between me and you,  
 I will make you exceedingly, exceedingly many.
- 

*The Covenant of Circumcision* (17): As Plaut notes, up to this point the covenant between God and Avram has been rather one-sided. In this chapter Avram is given a command to perform—not only of circumcision, but to be moral and upright (v.1, expanded in 18:19). Circumcision is but the symbol of the ongoing imperative to do “what is just.”

In many societies circumcision has been connected directly to puberty and marriage, usually taking place (as it does here to Yishmael) at around the age of thirteen. Our passage’s moving back of the rite essentially to birth is a daring reinterpretation, at once defusing the act of exclusively sexual content while at the same time suggesting that the covenant, a lifelong commitment, is nevertheless passed down biologically through the generations. The males of the tribe are not simply made holy for marriage. They bear the mark upon their bodies as a sacred reminder of their mission.

The chapter echoes with repetition: “exceedingly, exceedingly” (vv.6

- 6 **afflicted**: Or “abused,” “maltreated.”  
 7 **YHWH’s messenger**: Traditionally “angel,” but the English word stems from the Greek *angelos*, which also means “messenger.” In Genesis God’s messengers seem to be quite human in appearance, and are sometimes taken for God himself (see 18:2ff.).  
 10 **too many to count**: Apparently fulfilling God’s blessing and promise to Avram in 15:5. Until 17:16, nothing indicates that Yishmael is not Avram’s long-awaited heir.  
 11 **Yishmael**: Trad. English “Ishmael.”  
 13 **Have I actually gone on seeing . . .**: Heb. obscure. Hagar possibly is expressing surprise that she survived her encounter with God.  
 17:1 **Ninety years and nine years**: Thirteen years have elapsed since the events of the previous chapter. Now that Yishmael is entering puberty, God can no longer conceal that he is not the promised heir. See verses 16, 18.  
**Shaddai**: Hebrew obscure. Traditionally translated “Almighty”; others use “of the mountains.” In Genesis the name is most often tied to promises of human fertility, as in verse 2. **Walk . . . be whole**: Contrasted to Noah (6:9), Avram is a genuine religious man who lives his faith actively.  
 2 **set**: Heb. *va-ettena*. The root *ntn* is repeated throughout the chapter (as “make” in verses 5 and 6, and as “give” in verses 8 and 16).

- 3 Avram fell upon his face.  
God spoke with him,  
saying:
- 4 As for me,  
here, my covenant is with you,  
so that you will become the father of a throng of nations.
- 5 No longer shall your name be called Avram,  
rather shall your name be Avraham,  
for I will make you *Av Hamon Goyyim*/Father of a  
Throng of Nations!
- 6 I will cause you to bear fruit exceedingly, exceedingly,  
I will make nations of you,  
(yes,) kings will go out from you!
- 7 I establish my covenant between me and you and your seed  
after you, into their generations as a covenant for the  
ages,  
to be God to you and to your seed after you.
- 8 I will give to you and to your seed after you, the land of  
your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, as a holding for  
the ages,  
and I will be God to them.
- 9 God said to Avraham:  
As for you,  
you are to keep my covenant, you and your seed after you,  
into their generations.
- 10 This is my covenant which you are to keep, between me  
and you and your seed after you:  
every male among you shall be circumcised.
- 11 You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin,  
so that it may serve as a sign of the covenant between me  
and you.
- 12 At eight days old, every male among you shall be  
circumcised, into your generations,  
whether house-born or bought with money from any  
foreigner, who is not your seed.
- 13 Circumcised, yes, circumcised shall be your house-born and  
your money-bought (slaves),  
so that my covenant may be in your flesh as a covenant for  
the ages.

- 14 But a foreskinned male,  
 who does not have the foreskin of his flesh circumcised,  
 that person shall be cut off from his kinspeople—  
 he has broken my covenant!
- 15 God said to Avraham:  
 As for Sarai your wife—you shall not call her name Sarai,  
 for Sara/Princess is her name!
- 16 I will bless her, and I will give you a son from her,  
 I will bless her  
 so that she becomes nations,  
 kings of peoples shall come from her!
- 17 But Avraham fell on his face and laughed,  
 he said in his heart:  
     To a hundred-year-old man shall there be (children)  
     born?  
     Or shall ninety-year-old Sara give birth?
- 

and 20, referring to the fruitfulness of Avram's descendants), "you and your seed after you" (vv.7, 10; see also v.19), "for the ages" (covenant and land, vv.7, 8, 13, 19), and "into your generations" (vv.7, 9, 12).

Preparatory to Avram's assumption of fatherhood—of an individual and of a people—his name is changed (v.5), as is that of Sarai (v.15). This act is of the utmost significance in the biblical world. Since a person's name was indicative of personality and fate, the receiving of a new one signified a new life or a new stage in life. Similarly, Yaakov (and in a sort of coronation, Yosef) will undergo a change of name. Such a practice still survives among kings and popes.

- 4 **throng:** The word suggests the sound of a crowd, rather than merely a large number.
- 5 **Avraham:** Trad. English "Abraham."
- 8 **I will be God to them:** Often reiterated as part of the biblical covenant (e.g., 28:21).
- 12 **house-born or bought with money:** I.e., slaves. The entire household, as an extension of the man's personality, is to be brought into the covenant.
- 15 **you shall not call her name Sarai:** Significantly, Sara is the only woman in the Bible to have her name changed by God.
- 16 **so that she becomes nations:** Sara in essence shares the blessing of God. She is not merely the biological means for its fulfillment.
- 17 **laughed:** Laughter becomes the key word of most of the stories about Yitzhak.

- 18 Avraham said to God:  
If only Yishmael might live in your presence!
- 19 God said:  
Nevertheless,  
Sara your wife is to bear you a son,  
you shall call his name: Yitzhak/He Laughs.  
I will establish my covenant with him as a covenant for the  
ages, for his seed after him.
- 20 And as for Yishmael, I hearken to you:  
Here, I will make him blessed, I will make him bear fruit, I  
will make him exceedingly, exceedingly many—  
he will beget twelve princes, and I will make a great nation  
of him.
- 21 But my covenant I will establish with Yitzhak, whom Sara  
will bear to you at this set-time, another year hence.
- 22 When he had finished speaking with Avraham,  
God went up, from beside Avraham.
- 23 Avraham took Yishmael his son and all those born in his  
house and all those bought with his money,  
all the males among Avraham's household people,  
and circumcised the flesh of their foreskins on that very  
day,  
as God had spoken to him.
- 24 Avraham was ninety-nine years old when he had the flesh of  
his foreskin circumcised,
- 25 and Yishmael his son was thirteen years old when he had  
the flesh of his foreskin circumcised.
- 26 On that very day  
were circumcised Avraham and Yishmael his son,
- 27 and all his household people, whether house-born or  
money-bought from a foreigner, were circumcised with  
him.
- 18:1 Now YHWH was seen by him by the oaks of Mamre  
as he was sitting at the entrance to his tent at the heat of  
the day.
- 2 He lifted up his eyes and saw:  
here, three men standing over against him.

- When he saw them, he ran to meet them from the entrance  
to his tent and bowed to the earth
- 3 and said:  
My lords,  
pray if I have found favor in your eyes,  
pray do not pass by your servant!
- 4 Pray let a little water be fetched, then wash your feet and  
recline under the tree;
- 5 let me fetch (you) a bit of bread, that you may refresh your  
hearts,  
then afterward you may pass on—  
for you have, after all, passed your servant's way!  
They said:  
Do thus, as you have spoken.
- 

*Visit and Promise* (18:1–15): The announcement of Sara's impending child is set in the familiar ancient garb of a tale about divine travelers who visit an old couple. Central, as is usual in folklore, is the idea of hospitality, emphasized in the text by the threefold use of "pray" (please) (vv.3–4), "pass on/by" (vv.3–5), and by Avraham's flurry of activity (he himself "runs" twice, "hastens" three times, and "fetches" four times in serving his guests).

- 19 **Yitzhak**: Trad. English "Isaac."
- 20 **make him blessed . . . make him bear fruit . . . make him . . . many**: Heb. *berakhti oto ve-hifreti oto ve-hirbeti oto*. **twelve princes**: Thus equaling the twelve sons/tribes of Israel?
- 21 **another year**: Not nine months (Sara does not immediately become pregnant). Again the events seem to take place in a realistic framework, rather than in a strictly supernatural one.
- 22 **God went up, from beside Avraham**: Perhaps a formula used to signify the end of the conversation.
- 23 **on that very day**: Underlining Avraham's customary obedience. **as God had spoken to him**: Like Noah in 6:22, 7:5, and 7:9, Avraham scrupulously follows God's commands without question (so too in 21:4 and 22:3).
- 18:1 **entrance to his tent**: Also used in verses 2 and 10, it may hint at the important events being portrayed: the "entrance to the tent" is often a sacred spot in subsequent books of the Bible.
- 2 **three men**: See note on 16:7. **over against him**: Heb. *alav* could mean "over" or "next to" him.
- 3 **My lords**: Some use "My Lord."
- 4 **wash your feet**: Customary for weary travelers in the ancient world.

- 6 Avraham hastened into his tent to Sara and said:  
Make haste! Three measures of choice flour! Knead it,  
make bread-cakes!
- 7 Avraham ran to the oxen,  
he fetched a young ox, tender and fine, and gave it to a  
serving-lad, that he might hasten to make it ready;
- 8 then he fetched cream and milk and the young ox that he  
had made ready, and placed it before them.  
Now he stood over against them under the tree while they  
ate.
- 9 They said to him:  
Where is Sara your wife?  
He said:  
Here in the tent.  
Now he said:
- 10 I will return, yes, return to you when time revives,  
and Sara your wife will have a son!  
Now Sara was listening at the entrance to the tent, which  
was behind him.
- 11 And Avraham and Sara were old, advanced in days,  
the way of women had ceased for Sara.
- 12 Sara laughed within herself, saying:  
After I have become worn, is there to be pleasure for me?  
And my lord is old!
- 13 But YHWH said to Avraham:  
Now why does Sara laugh and say: Shall I really give birth,  
now that I am old?
- 14 Is anything beyond YHWH?  
At that set-time I will return to you, when time revives,  
and Sara will have a son.
- 15 Sara pretended otherwise, saying:  
No, I did not laugh.  
For she was afraid.  
But he said:  
No, indeed you laughed.
- 16 The men arose from there, and looked down upon the face  
of Sedom,  
and Avraham went with them to escort them.

- 17 Now YHWH had said to himself:  
 Shall I cover up from Avraham what I am about to do?
- 18 For Avraham is to become, yes, become a great and  
 numerous nation,  
 and all the nations of the earth will find blessing through  
 him.
- 19 Indeed, I have known him,  
 in order that he may charge his sons and his household after  
 him:  
 they shall keep the way of YHWH,  
 to do what is right and just,  
 in order that YHWH may bring upon Avraham what he  
 spoke concerning him.
- 

*The Great Intercession* (18:16-33): With verse 17 the narrative is interrupted, and there begins a remarkable scene in which man confronts God. As if to emphasize the importance of this encounter, the text presents God as thinking out loud, and using the intimate term “know” (see 4:1) to describe his relationship to Avraham. And Avraham, the man through whom the nations “will find blessing” (v.18; see 12:3), the progenitor of “a great . . . nation” (v.18; see 12:2) that will see in justice its great goal, is now confronted with an urgent question of justice. While Avraham seems to be testing God in this story, it may in fact be precisely the reverse that is intended. Perhaps here more than anywhere else in the entire cycle (with the possible exception of Chapter 22), Avraham appears as the worthy father of his people, the one who will “charge his sons and his household . . . to do what is right and just” (v.19). Without this story Avraham would be a man of faith but not a man of compassion and moral outrage, a model consistent with Moses and the Prophets of Israel.

The tightly structured, almost formal dialogue allows us to focus totally on the issue at hand. Predominating as refrains are the words “innocent” and “guilty,” along with the expected versions of “just/justice” that pervade Avraham’s remarks.

- 10 **when time revives:** An idiom for “next year.” B-R uses “at the time of life-bestowing.”
- 11 **the way of women:** The menstrual period.
- 12 **pleasure:** Sexual.

- 20 So YHWH said:  
The outcry in Sedom and Amora—how great it is!  
And their sin—how exceedingly heavily it weighs!
- 21 Now let me go down and see:  
if they have done according to its cry that has come to me—  
destruction!  
And if not—  
I wish to know.
- 22 The men turned from there and went toward Sedom,  
but Avraham still stood in the presence of YHWH.
- 23 Avraham came close and said:  
Will you really sweep away the innocent along with the  
guilty?
- 24 Perhaps there are fifty innocent within the city,  
will you really sweep it away?  
Will you not bear with the place because of the fifty  
innocent that are in its midst?
- 25 Heaven forbid for you to do a thing like this,  
to deal death to the innocent along with the guilty,  
that it should come about: like the innocent, like the guilty,  
Heaven forbid for you!  
The judge of all the earth—will he not do what is just?
- 26 YHWH said:  
If I find in Sedom fifty innocent within the city,  
I will bear with the whole place for their sake.
- 27 Avraham answered, and said:  
Now pray, I have ventured to speak to my Lord,  
and I am but earth and ashes:
- 28 Perhaps of the fifty innocent, five will be lacking—  
will you bring ruin upon the whole city because of the five?  
He said:  
I will not bring ruin, if I find there forty-five.
- 29 But he continued to speak to him, and said:  
Perhaps there will be found there only forty!  
He said:  
I will not do it, for the sake of the forty.
- 30 But he said:  
Pray let not my Lord be enraged that I speak further:  
Perhaps there will be found there only thirty!

- He said:  
I will not do it, if I find there thirty.
- 31 But he said:  
Now pray, I have ventured to speak to my Lord:  
Perhaps there will be found there only twenty!  
He said:  
I will not bring ruin, for the sake of the twenty.
- 32 But he said:  
Pray let my Lord not be enraged that I speak further just  
this one time:  
Perhaps there will be found there only ten!  
He said:  
I will not bring ruin, for the sake of the ten.
- 33 YHWH went, as soon as he had finished speaking to  
Avraham, and Avraham returned to his place.

- 19:1 The two messengers came to Sedom at evening,  
as Lot was sitting at the gate of Sedom.  
When Lot saw them, he arose to meet them and bowed  
low, brow to the ground
- 2 and said:  
Now pray, my lords,  
pray turn aside to your servant's house,  
spend the night, wash your feet;  
early tomorrow you may continue on your journey.

- 
- 21 **destruction:** Some read “altogether (according to its cry).”
- 22 **but Avraham still stood in the presence of YHWH:** Some manuscripts read “But YHWH still stood in the presence of Avraham.” The subject of the sentence has been reversed by scribes who were uncomfortable with the passage's human portrayal of God.
- 25 **Heaven forbid:** Lit. “May you have a curse,” an ironic turn of phrase in this situation. **like the innocent, like the guilty:** Or “innocent and guilty alike.”
- 26 **bear with:** Or “bear the sin,” “forgive.”
- 27 **earth and ashes:** Heb. *afar va-efer*, traditionally “dust and ashes.” The phrase, while common in English, is used in the Bible again only in Job (30:19, 42:6).
- 33 **YHWH went:** See note on 17:22.

- They said:  
No, rather we will spend the night in the square.
- 3 But he pressed them exceedingly hard,  
so they turned in to him and came into his house.  
He made them a meal-with-drink and baked flat-cakes, and  
they ate.
- 4 They had not yet lain down, when the men of the city, the  
men of Sodom, encircled the house,  
from young lad to old man, all the people (even) from the  
outskirts.
- 5 They called out to Lot and said to him:  
Where are the men who came to you tonight?  
Bring them out to us, we want to know them!
- 6 Lot went out to them, to the entrance, shutting the door  
behind him
- 7 and said:  
Pray, brothers, do not be so wicked!
- 8 Now pray, I have two daughters who have never known a  
man,  
pray let me bring them out to you, and you may deal with  
them however seems good in your eyes;  
only to these men do nothing,  
for they have, after all, come under the shadow of my  
roof-beam!
- 9 But they said:  
Step aside!  
and said:  
This one came to sojourn, and here he would act-the-judge  
and adjudicate?!  
Now we will treat you more wickedly than them!  
And they pressed exceedingly hard against the man, against  
Lot, and stepped closer to break down the door.
- 10 But the men put out their hand and brought Lot in to  
them, into the house, and shut the door.
- 11 And the men who were at the entrance to the house, they  
struck with dazzling-light—(all men) great and small,  
so that they were unable to find the entrance.
- 12 The men said to Lot:  
Whom else have you here—a son-in-law, sons, daughters?

- Bring anyone whom you have in the city out of the place!
- 13 For we are about to bring ruin on this place,  
for how great is their outcry before YHWH!  
And YHWH has sent us to bring it to ruin.
- 14 Lot went out to speak to his sons-in-law, those who had  
taken his daughters (in marriage), and said:  
Up, out of this place, for YHWH is about to bring ruin on  
the city!  
But in the eyes of his sons-in-law, he was like one who  
jests.
- 15 Now when the dawn rose,  
the messengers pushed Lot on, saying:  
Up, take your wife and your two daughters who are here,  
lest you be swept away in the punishment of the city!
- 16 When he lingered,  
the men seized his hand, his wife's hand, and the hand of  
his two daughters  
—because YHWH's pity was upon him—  
and, bringing him out, they left him outside the city.

---

*The End of Sodom and Amora* (19): The detailed and colorful story of Lot in Sodom and in flight from it adds a great deal to the Avraham cycle. On the one hand there is the portrayal of Lot's continuing his uncle's tradition of-hospitality (vv.1–3), even to the extent of being willing to sacrifice his own daughters' virginity. On the other hand Lot comes across as timid (vv.7–8) and fearful (vv.18–20). In fact the word “pray” (which we noted in Chapter 18 as a “hospitality term,” and which serves that function in verse 2 here as well) is used later in this chapter in a way that almost suggests whining. He thus once again brings Avraham's personality into sharper focus.

The crimes of Sodom and Amora are at last indicated more openly: abuse of the sacred duty of hospitality, and sexual immorality (v.5). The

- 19:5 **we want to know them**: The meaning is unmistakably sexual.
- 8 **pray let me bring them out to you . . .**: For a similar story, see Judges 19. There the offer of rape is accepted by the townspeople.
- 9 **act-the-judge and adjudicate**: Heb. *shafot yishpot*.
- 10 **the men**: The messengers.
- 11 **(all men) great and small**: Lit. “from small to great.”

- 17 It was, when they had brought him outside, that (one of them) said:  
Escape for your life, do not gaze behind you, do not stand still anywhere in the plain:  
to the mountain-country escape, lest you be swept away!
- 18 Lot said to them:  
No, pray, my lord!
- 19 Now pray, your servant has found favor in your eyes, you have shown great faithfulness in how you have dealt with me, keeping me alive—  
but I, I am not able to escape to the mountain-country, lest the wickedness cling to me, and I die!
- 20 Now pray, that town is near enough to flee to, and it is so tiny;  
pray let me escape there—is it not tiny?—and stay alive!
- 21 He said to him:  
Here then, I lift up your face in this matter as well, by not overturning this town of which you speak.
- 22 Make haste, escape there,  
for I am not able to do anything until you come there.  
Therefore the name of the town was called: Tzo'ar/Tiny.
- 23 (Now) the sun was going out over the earth as Lot came to Tzo'ar.
- 24 But YHWH rained down brimstone and fire upon Sodom and Amora, coming from YHWH, from the heavens,  
25 he overturned those cities and all of the plain, all those settled in the cities and the vegetation of the soil.
- 26 Now his wife gazed behind him, and she became a pillar of salt.
- 27 Early in the morning Avraham (arose) to the place where he had stood in YHWH's presence,  
28 he looked down upon the face of Sodom and Amora and upon the whole face of the plain-country and saw:  
here, the dense-smoke of the land ascended like the dense-smoke of a furnace!
- 29 Thus it was, when God brought ruin on the cities of the plain,

that God kept Avraham in mind and sent out Lot from the overturning,  
when he overturned the cities where Lot had settled.

- 30 Lot went up from Tzo'ar and settled in the mountain-country, his two daughters with him, for he was afraid to settle in Tzo'ar.  
So he settled in a cave, he and his two daughters.

latter theme returns at the end of the story, with the incestuous incident that takes place at the instigation of Lot's daughters.

The story uses some stylized vocabulary. In verse 13, the messengers talk of "bringing ruin," just as we encountered in the Flood narrative (6:13). The narrative also gives negative twists to words which were positive in the previous chapter: "know" and "just" are changed to indicate illicit sex (v.5) and a condemnation of the alien Lot (v.9, "act-the-judge and adjudicate"). Here too, "door/entrance" is transformed from a place of contact with God to one of confrontation with men.

The account of the destruction itself is terse and mysterious, but it also reveals the predicament of an all-too-human man, Lot.

The final section of the Sedom and Amora story recounts the origins of two of Israel's neighbors, the Moabites and Ammonites. As traditional enemies, they are not treated very kindly, any more than was the ancestor of the Canaanites in 9:20–27.

- 17 **Escape:** Heb. *himmalet*, used five times here. Perhaps it is a pun on Lot's name; he is "the escaper" in a number of situations.
- 19 **lest the wickedness cling to me:** The expression of an idea common to many cultures: that evil is like a disease, a physical rather than purely moral entity.
- 20 **tiny:** Or "a trifle."
- 21 **lift up your face:** A similar Assyrian phrase means "save" or "cheer."  
**overturning:** Overthrowing. The word is used later in the Bible to describe the fate of the two cities again (e.g., Lam. 4:6).
- 22 **I am not able . . . until you come there:** In deference to Avraham (see verse 29).
- 26 **she became a pillar of salt:** An old folklore motif of what happens when humans see God (or his actions), made popular by the many mineral pillars in the region around the Dead Sea.
- 27 **Early in the morning Avraham (arose):** Or "In the morning Avraham hurried" (Speiser).

- 31 Now the firstborn said to the younger:  
Our father is old,  
and there is no man in the land to come in to us as befits  
the way of all the earth!
- 32 Come, let us have our father drink wine and lie with him  
so that we may keep seed alive by our father.
- 33 So they had their father drink wine that night,  
then the firstborn went in and lay with her father—  
but he knew nothing of her lying down or her rising up.
- 34 It was on the morrow that the firstborn said to the younger:  
Here, yesternight I lay with father.  
Let us have him drink wine tonight as well,  
then you go in and lie with him,  
so that we may keep seed alive by our father.
- 35 They had their father drink wine that night as well,  
then the younger arose and lay with him,  
but he knew nothing of her lying down or her rising up.
- 36 And Lot's two daughters became pregnant by their father.
- 37 The firstborn bore a son and called his name: Mo'av/By  
Father,  
he is the tribal-father of Mo'av of today.
- 38 The younger also bore a son, and called his name:  
Ben-Ammi/Son of My Kinspeople,  
he is the tribal-father of the Sons of Ammon of today.
- 20:1 Avraham traveled from there to the Southland, and settled  
between Kadesh and Shur, sojourning in Gerar.
- 2 Avraham said of Sara his wife: She is my sister.  
So Avimelekh king of Gerar sent and had Sara taken.
- 3 But God came to Avimelekh in a dream of the night and  
said to him:  
Here, you must die because of the woman whom you have  
taken,  
for she is a wedded wife!
- 4 Avimelekh had not come near her. He said:  
My Lord,  
Would you kill a nation, though it be innocent?
- 5 Did he not say to me: She is my sister,  
and also she, she said: He is my brother!

- With a whole heart and with clean hands have I done this.
- 6 God said to him in the dream:  
I also know that it was with a whole heart that you did this,  
and so I also held you back from being at fault against me,  
therefore I did not let you touch her.
- 7 But now, return the man's wife  
—indeed, he is a prophet, he can intercede for you—  
and live!  
But if you do not return her:  
know that you must die, yes, die, you and all that is yours!
- 8 Avimelekh (arose) early in the morning and called all his  
servants,  
he spoke all these words in their ears, and the men became  
exceedingly afraid.
- 9 Then Avimelekh had Avraham called and said to him:  
What have you done to us?  
In what did I fail you,  
that you have brought me and my kingdom into such great  
fault?  
Deeds which are not to be done, you have done to me!
- 10 And Avimelekh said to Avraham:  
What did you foresee, that you did this thing?

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*The Wife—II* (Chap. 20): The second occurrence of “The Matriarch Protected” comes immediately before the story of Yitzhak’s birth, as if to emphasize God’s hand in the process one more time. In this long variation on the theme, God is most active and Avraham most revealing of his past. He emerges from danger as a man who clearly enjoys God’s full protection and bounty.

The story almost draws a web of magic around Sara. Avimelekh is nearly killed by God, and Sara’s childlessness is inflicted upon all the women in the king’s household—even though there is not the slightest doubt of his innocence (he “had not come near her”).

- 35 **but he knew nothing . . .** : The repetition of the phrase from verse 33 is meant either to absolve Lot or to ridicule him.
- 37 **Mo'av**: Trad. English “Moab.”
- 20:3 **wedded wife**: Heb. *be'ulat ba'al*.
- 5 **With a whole heart**: Lit. “In the wholeness of my heart.”
- 6 **being at fault**: Or “sinning,” which is perhaps too theological a translation.

- 11 Avraham said:  
Indeed, I said to myself:  
Surely there is no fear of God in this place,  
they will kill me on account of my wife!
- 12 Then, too, she is truly my sister, my father's daughter,  
however not my mother's daughter—so she became my  
wife.
- 13 Now it was, when the power-of-God caused me to roam  
from my father's house,  
that I said to her:  
Let this be the faithfulness that you do me:  
in every place that we come, say of me: He is my brother.
- 14 Avimelekh took sheep and oxen, servants and maids, and  
gave them to Avraham,  
and returned Sara his wife to him.
- 15 Avimelekh said:  
Here, my land is before you,  
settle wherever seems good in your eyes.
- 16 And to Sara he said:  
Here, I have given a thousand pieces of silver to your  
brother,  
here, it shall serve you as a covering for the eyes for all who  
are with you  
and with everyone, that you have been decided for.
- 17 Avraham interceded with God  
and God healed Avimelekh: his wife and his slave-women,  
so that they gave birth.
- 18 For YHWH had obstructed, obstructed every womb in  
Avimelekh's household  
on account of Sara, the wife of Avraham.
- 21:1 Now YHWH took account of Sara as he had said,  
YHWH dealt with Sara as he had spoken.
- 2 Sara became pregnant and bore Avraham a son in his old  
age,  
at the set-time of which God had spoken to him.
- 3 And Avraham called the name of his son, who was born to  
him, whom Sara bore to him:  
Yitzhak/He Laughs.

- 4 And Avraham circumcised Yitzhak his son at eight days old, as God had commanded him.
  - 5 Avraham was a hundred years old when Yitzhak his son was born to him.
  - 6 Now Sara said:  
God has made laughter for me,  
all who hear of it will laugh for me.
  - 7 And she said:  
Who would have declared to Avraham:  
Sara will nurse sons?  
Well, I have borne him a son in his old age!
  - 8 The child grew and was weaned,  
and Avraham made a great drinking-feast on the day that  
Yitzhak was weaned.
  - 9 Once Sara saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian-woman,  
whom she had borne to Avraham, laughing. . . .
- 

*Yitzhak Born* (21:1–8): Two principal ideas punctuate this climax for which we have waited since Chapter 12: God keeps his promises (hence the poem in verse 1), and the key word in the stories about Yitzhak: “laughter” (here the result of the actual birth).

*Yishmael Banished* (21:9–21): Once Yitzhak has been born, separation must be made between heir and firstborn. Despite Avraham’s obvious love for him, Yishmael must leave; his mother must repeat her ordeal of

- 11 **fear:** Awe; often used of God in the Bible.
- 13 **roam:** A word which in Genesis suggests a wandering that is nevertheless directed by God. See 21:14 and 37:15 for other examples. This passage gives us a fascinating glimpse of Avraham’s own perception of the events in Chapter 12. It is not unusual for the biblical storyteller to give out information in this manner (in a later speech of the protagonist). **faithfulness:** Or “favor.”
- 16 **a covering for the eyes:** Hebrew obscure; apparently it has legal connotations (see also “decided for” at the end of the verse).
- 18 **YHWH had obstructed:** On account of Sara, the “obstructed” one of 16:2.
- 21:6 **laugh for me:** Out of joy or disbelief. Some suggest “laugh at.”
- 9 **laughing:** Perhaps mockingly. The theme of Yitzhak’s life continues.

- 10 She said to Avraham:  
Drive out this slave-woman and her son,  
for the son of this slave-woman shall not share inheritance  
with my son, with Yitzhak!
- 11 The matter was exceedingly bad in Avraham's eyes because  
of his son.
- 12 But God said to Avraham:  
Do not let it be bad in your eyes concerning the lad and  
concerning your slave-woman;  
in all that Sara says to you, hearken to her voice,  
for it is through Yitzhak that seed will be called by your  
(name).
- 13 But also the son of the slave-woman—a nation will I make  
of him,  
for he too is your seed.
- 14 Avraham (arose) early in the morning,  
he took some bread and a skin of water  
and gave them to Hagar—placing them upon her shoulder—  
together with the child and sent her away.  
She went off and roamed in the wilderness of Be'er-Sheva.
- 15 Now when the water in the skin was at an end, she cast the  
child under one of the bushes,
- 16 and went and sat by herself, opposite, as far away as a  
bowshot,  
for she said to herself:  
Let me not see the child die!  
So she sat opposite, and lifted up her voice and wept.
- 17 But God heard the voice of the lad,  
God's messenger called to Hagar from heaven and said to  
her:  
What ails you, Hagar? Do not be afraid,  
for God has heard the voice of the lad there where he is.
- 18 Arise, lift up the lad and grasp him with your hand,  
for a great nation will I make of him!
- 19 God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water;  
she went, filled the skin with water, and gave the lad to  
drink.
- 20 And God was with the lad as he grew up,  
he settled in the wilderness, and became an archer, a  
bowman.

- 21 He settled in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took him a wife from the land of Egypt.
- 22 It was at about that time that Avimelekh, together with Pikhol the commander of his army, said to Avraham: God is with you in all that you do.
- 23 So now, swear to me here by God:  
If you should ever deal falsely with me, with my progeny and my posterity . . . !  
Rather, faithfully, as I have dealt with you, deal with me, and with the land in which you have sojourned.
- 24 Avraham said:  
I so swear.
- 25 But Avraham rebuked Avimelekh because of a well of water that Avimelekh's servants had seized.
- 26 Avimelekh said:  
I do not know who did this thing,  
nor have you ever told me, nor have I heard of it apart from today.

---

Chapter 16 as well. Nonetheless the text emphasizes that God is there “with the lad” (v.20); twice the Yishamel motif of “God hearkening” resounds (v.17); and God promises that the boy will eventually attain the same exalted status as his brother (vv.13, 18).

Structurally, this brief tale foreshadows the next chapter, the ordeal of Yitzhak. It speaks of a journey into the unknown, a child at the point of death, the intervention of God's “messenger,” the parent's sighting of the way out, and the promise of future blessing. Of course the differences between the two stories are equally important.

*Treaty* (21:22–34): This interlude, which usefully separates the life threats to Avraham's two sons (for a similar example, see I Samuel 25), is one of many scenes demonstrating Avraham's relationship with local princes.

11 **bad in Avraham's eyes:** Displeasing or upsetting to him.

12 **seed will be called:** I.e., your line will be continued.

14 **Be'er-Sheva:** Trad. English “Beersheba.”

23 **with my progeny and my posterity:** Heb. *u-le-nini u-le-nekhdi*.

- 27 So Avraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to  
Avimelekh,  
and the two of them cut a covenant.
- 28 Then Avraham set seven ewe-lambs of the flock aside.
- 29 Avimelekh said to Avraham:  
What mean these seven ewe-lambs that you have set aside?
- 30 He said:  
Indeed, these seven ewe-lambs you should take from my  
hand,  
so that they may be a witness for me that I dug this well.
- 31 Therefore that place was called Be'er-Sheva/Well of the  
Seven-Swearing,  
for there the two of them swore (an oath).
- 32 Thus they cut a covenant in Be'er-Sheva.  
Then Avimelekh and Pikhoh the commander of his army  
arose  
and returned to the land of the Philistines.
- 33 Now he planted a tamarisk in Be'er-Sheva  
and there he called out the name: YHWH God of the Ages.
- 34 And Avraham sojourned in the land of the Philistines for  
many days.

- 22:1 Now after these events it was  
that God tested Avraham  
and said to him:  
Avraham!  
He said:  
Here I am.
- 2 He said:  
Pray take your son,  
your only-one,  
whom you love,  
Yitzhak,  
and go-you-forth to the land of Moriyya/Seeing,  
and offer him up there as an offering-up  
upon one of the mountains  
that I will tell you of.
- 3 Avraham (arose) early in the morning,  
he saddled his ass,

- he took his two serving-lads with him and Yitzhak his son,  
 he split wood for the offering-up  
 and arose and went to the place that God had told him of.
- 4 On the third day Avraham lifted up his eyes  
 and saw the place from afar.
- 5 Avraham said to his lads:  
 You stay here with the ass,  
 and I and the lad will go yonder,  
 we will bow down and then return to you.
- 

*The Great Test (22):* This story is certainly one of the masterpieces of biblical literature. In a famous article by Erich Auerbach it is remarked how biblical style as exemplified here, in contradistinction to that of Homer and other epic bards, eschews physical and psychological details in favor of one central preoccupation: a man's decision in relation to God. The result of this style is a terrible intensity, a story which is so stark as to be almost unbearable.

Chapter 22 is a tale of God's seeming retraction of his promise (of "seed") to Avraham. The fact that other issues may be involved here (i.e., Israel's rejection of local and widely practiced ideas of child sacrifice) may be quite beside the point. Coming just one chapter after the birth of the long-awaited son, the story completely turns around the tension of the whole cycle and creates a new, frightening tension of its own. The real horror of the story lies in this threatened contradiction to what has gone before.

Most noticeable in the narrative is Avraham's silence, his mute acceptance of, and acting on, God's command. We are told of no sleepless

- 30 **take:** Accept.
- 33 **tamarisk:** A tree rarely mentioned in the Bible, it may indicate a holy place, similar to the oaks where Avraham dwells earlier. **God of the Ages:** A name unique to this passage.
- 34 **Philistines:** Another anachronism. The Philistines appear first in the days of the Conquest (Joshua and Judges).
- 22:1 **after these events:** Others use "Some time afterward." **Here I am:** A term frequently used to convey readiness, usually in relation to God's command or address.
- 2 **Yitzhak:** The name is left until the end of the phrase, to heighten tension. Similarly, see 27:32. **Moriyya:** Trad. English "Moriah." The mountain here is later identified with the site of Solomon's Temple.
- 5 **bow down:** Worship.

- 6 Avraham took the wood for the offering-up,  
he placed them upon Yitzhak his son,  
in his hand he took the fire and the knife.  
Thus the two of them went together.
- 7 Yitzhak said to Avraham his father, he said:  
Father!  
He said:  
Here I am, my son.  
He said:  
Here are the fire and the knife,  
but where is the lamb for the offering-up?
- 8 Avraham said:  
God will select for himself the lamb for the offering-up,  
my son.  
Thus the two of them went together.
- 9 They came to the place that God had told him of;  
there Avraham built the slaughter-site  
and arranged the wood  
and bound Yitzhak his son  
and placed him on the slaughter-site atop the wood.
- 10 Avraham stretched out his hand,  
he took the knife to slay his son.
- 11 But YHWH's messenger called to him from heaven  
and said:  
Avraham! Avraham!  
He said:  
Here I am.
- 12 He said:  
Do not stretch out your hand against the lad,  
do not do anything to him!  
For now I know  
that you are God-fearing—  
you have not withheld your son, your only-one, from me.
- 13 Avraham lifted up his eyes and saw:  
there, a ram caught behind in the thicket by its horns!  
Avraham went,  
he took the ram  
and offered it up as an offering-up in place of his son.
- 14 Avraham called the name of that place: YHWH Sees.  
As the saying is today: On YHWH's mountain (it) is seen.

- 15 Now YHWH's messenger called to Avraham a second time  
from heaven
- 16 and said:  
By myself I swear  
—YHWH's utterance—  
indeed, because you have done this thing, have not withheld  
your son, your only-one,
- 

night, nor does he ever say a word to God. Instead he is described with a series of verbs: arising, saddling, taking, splitting, arising, going (v.3; similarly in vv.6 and 9–10). Avraham the bargainer, so willing to enter into negotiations with relations (Chapter 13), allies (Chapter 14), local princes (Chapter 20), and even God himself (Chapter 18), here falls completely silent.

The chapter serves an important structural function in the Avraham cycle, framing it in conjunction with Chapter 12. The triplet in verse 2 (“Pray take your son,/ your only-one,/ whom you love”) recalls “from your land/ from your kindred/ from your father's house” in 12:1; “go-you-forth” and “the land that I will tell you of” (v.2; the latter, three times in the story) similarly point back to Avraham's call (12:1, “Go-you forth . . . to the land that I will let you see”). There he had been asked to give up the past (his father); here, the future (his son). Between the two events lies Avraham's active life as man of God, ancestor, and intercessor. After this God will never speak with him again.

In many ways this story is the midpoint of Genesis. It brings the central theme of continuity and discontinuity to a head in the strongest possible way. After Moriyya, we can breathe easier, knowing that God will come to the rescue of his chosen ones in the direst of circumstances. At the same time we are left to ponder the difficulties of being a chosen one, subject to such an incredible test.

The story is also the paradigmatic narrative of the entire book. The

- 6, 8 **Thus the two of them went together:** Between these two statements is Avraham's successful deflection of Yitzhak's question, and perhaps the hint of a happy ending.
- 7 **fire:** I.e., a torch or brand.
- 8 **select for himself:** Heb. *yir'e lo*; see the name of the mountain in verse 14, “YHWH Sees” (*yir'e*). **offering-up,/ my son:** One might read it with a dash instead of a comma, to preserve what may be an ironic answer.
- 13 **a ram caught behind:** Some read “one ram caught.”
- 16 **YHWH's utterance:** A phrase often found in the Prophetic books. See note on 15:1.

- 17 indeed, I will bless you, bless you,  
I will make your seed many, yes, many,  
like the stars of the heavens and like the sand that is on the  
shore of the sea;  
your seed shall inherit the gate of their enemies,  
18 all the nations of the earth shall enjoy blessing through your  
seed,  
in consequence of your hearkening to my voice.  
19 Avraham returned to his lads,  
they arose and went together to Be'er-Sheva.  
And Avraham stayed in Be'er-Sheva.
- 20 Now after these events it was, that it was told to Avraham,  
saying:  
Here, Milca too has borne, sons to Nahor your brother:  
21 Utz his firstborn and Buz his brother, Kemuel father of  
22 Aram, and/ Cesed, Hazo, Pildash, Yidlaf, and Betuel.  
23 Now Betuel begot Rivka.—  
These eight Milca bore to Nahor, Avraham's brother.  
24 And his concubine—her name was Re'uma—bore too:  
Tevah, Gaham, Tahash and Maakha.
- 23:1 Now Sara's life was one hundred years and twenty years  
and seven years, (thus) the years of Sara's life.  
2 Sara died in Arba-Town, that is now Hevron, in the land of  
Canaan.  
Avraham set about to lament for Sara and to weep over her;  
3 then Avraham arose from the presence of his dead  
and spoke to the Sons of Het, saying:  
4 I am a sojourner settled among you;  
give me title to a burial holding among you,  
so that I may bury my dead from my presence.  
5 The Sons of Het answered Avraham, saying to him:  
6 Hear us, my lord!  
You are one exalted by God in our midst—  
in the choicest of our burial-sites you may bury your dead,  
no man among us will deny you his burial-site  
for burying your dead!  
7 Avraham arose,

- he bowed low to the People of the Land, to the Sons of Het,  
 8 and spoke with them, saying:  
 If it be then according to your wish  
 that I bury my dead from my presence,  
 hear me and interpose for me to Efron son of Tzohar,  
 9 that he may give me title to the cave of Makhpela, that is  
 his, that is at the edge of his field,  
 for the full silver-worth let him give me title in your midst  
 for a burial holding.
- 

Patriarch passes the test, and we know that the fulfillment of the divine promise is assured. Yet there is an ominous note: love, which occurs here by name for the first time, leads almost to heartbreak. So it will be for the rest of Genesis.

*Purchase and Burial* (23): Even though he is now secure in God's covenant, Avraham must still live and function in the human world. His purchase of a burial plot for Sara shows us once more his dealings with his neighbors, here as their equal, and also establishes at last his legal

- 17 **indeed, I will bless you:** Avraham has received such blessings before, but never before "because you have hearkened to my voice" (v.18). **inherit the gate:** I.e., possess or take the city.  
 18 **all the nations . . . :** See 12:3.  
 19 **Avraham returned:** The fact that Yitzhak is not mentioned here has given rise to speculation for centuries (see Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial*). The omission may simply arise from the fact that Yitzhak as a personality is not important to the story, which is first and foremost a test of Avraham.  
 23 **Rivka:** Trad. English "Rebecca."  
 23:1 **(thus) the years of Sara's life:** She is the only biblical woman whose life span is given, again as a sign of importance.  
 3 **Sons of Het:** Or "Hittites," not to be confused with the great Hittite empire in Asia Minor. Here the name describes a Canaanite group.  
 4 **a sojourner:** Even after many years, Avraham is still acutely aware of his nonnative status in the land.  
 5–6 **saying to him:/ Hear us:** Others use "saying:/ No, hear us."  
 6 **one exalted:** Others use "a prince."  
 7 **People of the Land:** Possibly a title indicating notables, not, as in later usage, the "common folk."

- 10 Now Efron had a seat amidst the Sons of Het,  
and Efron the Hittite answered Avraham in the ears of the  
Sons of Het,  
of all who had entry to the council-gate of his city,  
saying:
- 11 Not so, my lord, hear me!  
The field I give to you,  
and the cave that is therein, to you I give it;  
before the eyes of the Sons of My People I give it to you—  
bury your dead!
- 12 Avraham bowed before the People of the Land  
13 and spoke to Efron in the ears of the People of the Land,  
saying:  
But if you yourself would only hear me out!  
I will give the silver-payment for the field,  
accept it from me,  
so that I may bury my dead there.
- 14 Efron answered Avraham, saying to him:  
15 My lord—hear me!  
A piece of land worth four hundred silver weight,  
what is that between me and you!  
You may bury your dead!
- 16 Avraham hearkened to Efron:  
Avraham weighed out to Efron the silver-worth  
of which he had spoken in the ears of the Sons of Het—  
four hundred silver weight at the going merchants' rate.
- 17 Thus was established the field of Efron, that is in  
Makhpela, that faces Mamre,  
the field as well as the cave that is in it, and the trees that  
were in all the field, that were in all their territory round  
about,
- 18 for Avraham as an acquisition,  
before the eyes of the Sons of Het, of all who had entry to  
the council-gate of his city.
- 19 Afterward Avraham buried Sara his wife  
in the cave of the field of Makhpela, facing Mamre, that is  
now Hevron, in the land of Canaan.
- 20 Thus was established the field as well as the cave that is in  
it for Avraham as a burial holding, from the Sons of Het.

- 24:1 Now Avraham was old, advanced in days,  
and YHWH had blessed Avraham in everything.
- 2 Avraham said to his servant, the elder of his household,  
who ruled over all that was his:  
Pray put your hand under my thigh!
- 3 I want you to swear by YHWH, the God of Heaven and the  
God of Earth,  
that you will not take a wife for my son from the women of  
the Canaanites, among whom I am settled;
- 

foothold in Canaan, albeit with a small piece of land. The long conversations and considerable formality of the chapter, which are not unusual in an ancient Near Eastern context, contrast with the extreme brevity of the previous chapter.

The narrative strikes a curious balance between the emotional reality of the situation (e.g., the repetition of “dead,” “presence,” and “bury”) and the requirements of legal procedure (“Hear me,” “give title,” and “holding”).

*The Betrothal Journey* (24): The last full episode of the Avraham cycle is the longest in the book. Its leisurely pace, attention to detail, and concentration on speeches as well as action belie the importance of what is being recounted: the finding of a wife for Yitzhak, who is biologically to continue the line. Yet after all that has happened in the previous chapters, we know that this will be taken care of by God. That is implied in Avraham’s assured “he himself [God] will send his messenger on before you” (v.7).

Many meeting/betrothal scenes in the Bible take place at a well (e.g., Jacob, Moses); this was probably a literary convention (see Culley and Alter for a discussion of the significance of such a phenomenon). Like other crucial moments in Avraham’s life the chapter involves a journey, albeit one made by his emissary. It is therefore natural that the key words of the chapter are “go,” “journey,” and “grant success.” “Take” also appears frequently, as the biblical term often used for “marry.”

10 **of all who had entry**: Similar to “People of the Land”—the aristocrats.

20 **established**: Others use “made over.”

24:1 **put your hand under my thigh**: A symbol used in taking of an oath (see also 47:29). The use of “thigh” might allude to a curse of childlessness as the punishment for not keeping the oath.

- 4 rather, you are to go to my land and to my kindred, and  
take a wife for my son, for Yitzhak.
- 5 The servant said to him:  
Perhaps the woman will not be willing to go after me to this  
land;  
may I then bring your son back there,  
back to the land from which you once went out?
- 6 Avraham said to him:  
Watch out that you do not ever bring my son back there!
- 7 YHWH, the God of Heaven,  
who took me from my father's house and from my kindred,  
who spoke to me,  
who swore to me, saying:  
I give this land to your seed—  
he himself will send his messenger on before you,  
so that you take a wife for my son from there.
- 8 Now if the woman is not willing to go after you,  
you will be clear from this sworn-oath of mine,  
only: You are not to bring my son back there!
- 9 The servant put his hand under the thigh of Avraham his  
lord,  
and swore to him (an oath) about this matter.
- 10 The servant took ten camels from his lord's camels and  
went, all kinds of good-things from his lord in his hand.  
He arose and went to Aram Of-Two-Rivers, to Nahor's  
town.
- 11 He had the camels kneel outside the town at the water well  
at eventime, at the time when the water-drawers go out,
- 12 and said:  
YHWH, God of my lord Avraham,  
pray let it happen today for me, and deal faithfully with my  
lord Avraham!
- 13 Here, I have stationed myself by the water spring as the  
women of the town go out to draw water.
- 14 May it be  
that the maiden to whom I say: Pray lower your pitcher that  
I may drink,  
and she says: Drink, and I will also give your camels to  
drink—

- let her be the one that you have decided on for your  
servant, for Yitzhak,  
by means of her may I know that you have dealt faithfully  
with my lord.
- 15 And it was: Not yet had he finished speaking,  
when here, Rivka came out,  
—she had been born to Betuel, son of Milca, wife of Nahor,  
brother of Avraham—  
her pitcher on her shoulder.
- 16 The maiden was exceedingly beautiful to look at,  
a virgin—no man had known her.  
Going down to the spring, she filled her pitcher and came  
up again.
- 17 The servant ran to meet her and said:  
Pray let me sip a little water from your pitcher!
- 18 She said:  
Drink, my lord!  
And in haste she let down her pitcher on her arm and gave  
him to drink.
- 19 When she had finished giving him to drink, she said:  
I will also draw for your camels, until they have finished  
drinking.
- 20 In haste she emptied her pitcher into the drinking-trough,  
then she ran to the well again to draw,  
and drew for all his camels.
- 21 The man kept staring at her,  
(waiting) silently to find out whether YHWH had granted  
success to his journey or not.
- 22 It was, when the camels had finished drinking,

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5 **back there:** The Hebrew text has “there” in the next line; it has been moved up in the English text for reasons of style. The word occurs four times in verses 5–8, as a signal of what is most important to Avraham: that his son must stay in the land of Canaan.

7 **I give this land to your seed:** Quoting 12:7.

10 **Aram Of-Two-Rivers:** Others leave untranslated, “Aram-Naharayim.”

11 **water-drawers:** Female.

12 **let it happen:** Or “let it go well.”

- that the man took a gold nose-ring, a half-coin in weight,  
and two bracelets for her wrists, ten gold pieces in weight,  
23 and said:  
Whose daughter are you? Pray tell me!  
And is there perhaps in your father's house a place for us to  
spend the night?
- 24 She said to him:  
I am the daughter of Betuel, son of Milca, whom she bore  
to Nahor.
- 25 And she said to him:  
Yes, there is straw, yes, plenty of fodder with us, (and) yes,  
a place to spend the night.
- 26 In homage the man bowed low before YHWH  
27 and said:  
Blessed be YHWH, God of my lord Avraham,  
who has not relinquished his faithfulness and his  
trustworthiness from my lord!  
While as for me, YHWH has led me on the journey to the  
house of my lord's brothers!
- 28 The maiden ran and told her mother's household according  
to these words.
- 29 Now Rivka had a brother, his name was Lavan.  
Lavan ran to the man, outside, to the spring:
- 30 and it was,  
as soon as he saw the nose-ring, and the bracelets on his  
sister's wrists,  
and as soon as he heard Rivka his sister's words, saying:  
Thus the man spoke to me,  
that he came out to the man—there, he was still standing by  
the camels, by the spring—
- 31 and said:  
Come, you who are blessed by YHWH, why are you  
standing outside?  
I myself have cleared out the house and a place for the  
camels!
- 32 The man came into the house and unbridled the camels,  
they gave straw and fodder to the camels  
and water for washing his feet and the feet of the men that  
were with him.

- 33 (Food) was put before him to eat, but he said:  
I will not eat until I have spoken my words.  
He said: Speak!
- 34 He said:  
I am Avraham's servant.
- 35 YHWH has blessed my lord exceedingly, so that he has  
become great,  
he has given him sheep and oxen, silver and gold, servants  
and maids, camels and asses.
- 36 Sara, my lord's wife, bore my lord a son after she had  
grown old,  
and he has given him all that is his.
- 37 Now my lord had me swear, saying:  
You are not to take a wife for my son from the women of  
the Canaanites, in whose land I am settled!
- 38 No! To my father's house you are to go, to my clan,  
and take a wife for my son.
- 39 I said to my lord:  
Perhaps the woman will not go after me!
- 40 He said to me:  
YHWH, in whose presence I have walked, will send his  
messenger with you,  
he will grant success to your journey,  
so that you take a wife for my son from my clan and from  
my father's house.
- 

- 25 **Yes, there is straw:** Not until Rivka has extended the offer of hospitality (and enthusiastically, with the triple "yes") is the servant sure that "YHWH has granted success to my journey." Hospitality, once again, is the determinant, over and above beauty or virginity.
- 27 **his faithfulness and his trustworthiness:** Others combine and translate as "steadfast kindness." The phrase is often found in the Psalms, describing God. **brothers:** Relatives.
- 29 **Lavan:** Trad. English "Laban." He will be a key figure in the story of Rivka's son Yaakov.
- 34 **He said . . . :** The servant's speech diplomatically omits certain emotional details of Avraham's speech, most notably his warning against Yitzhak himself's going back "there."
- 40 **will send his messenger:** Speaking figuratively.

- 41 Only then will you be clear from my binding-oath:  
When you come to my clan,  
if they do not give her to you, you will be clear from my  
binding-oath.
- 42 Now I came to the well today and said:  
YHWH, God of my lord Avraham,  
pray, if you wish to grant success to the journey on which I  
am going,
- 43 here: I have stationed myself by the water spring;  
may it be  
that the girl who comes out to draw,  
to whom I say: Pray give me a little water from your pitcher  
to drink,
- 44 and she says to me: You drink, and I will also draw for  
your camels—  
let her be the woman whom YHWH has decided on for the  
son of my lord.
- 45 (And) I, even before I had finished speaking in my heart,  
here, Rivka came out, her pitcher on her shoulder,  
she went down to the spring and drew.  
I said to her: Pray give me to drink!
- 46 In haste she let down her pitcher from herself and said:  
Drink, and I will also give your camels to drink.  
I drank, and she also gave the camels to drink.
- 47 Then I asked her, I said: Whose daughter are you?  
She said: The daughter of Betuel, son of Nahor, whom  
Milca bore to him.  
I put the ring on her nose and the bracelets on her wrists,
- 48 and in homage I bowed low before YHWH, and blessed  
YHWH, God of my lord Avraham,  
who led me on the true journey to take the daughter of my  
lord's brother for his son.
- 49 So now, if you wish to deal faithfully and truly with my  
lord, tell me,  
and if not, tell me,  
that I may (know to) turn right or left.
- 50 Lavan and Betuel answered, they said:  
The matter has come from YHWH;  
we cannot speak anything to you evil or good.
- 51 Here is Rivka before you,

take her and go, that she may be a wife for the son of your lord,  
as YHWH has spoken.

- 52 It was  
when Avraham's servant heard their words, that he bowed  
to the ground before YHWH.
- 53 And the servant brought out objects of silver and objects of  
gold and garments, and gave them to Rivka,  
and he gave presents to her brother and to her mother.
- 54 They ate and drank, he and the men that were with him,  
and spent the night.  
When they arose in the morning, he said:  
Send me off to my lord.
- 55 But her brother and her mother said:  
Let the maiden stay with us a few days, perhaps ten— after  
that she may go.
- 56 He said to them:  
Do not delay me, for YHWH has granted success to my  
journey;  
send me off, that I may go back to my lord.
- 57 They said:  
Let us call the maiden and ask (for an answer from) her  
own mouth.
- 58 They called Rivka and said to her:  
Will you go with this man?  
She said:  
I will go.
- 59 They sent off Rivka their sister with her nurse, and  
Avraham's servant with his men,

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41 **binding-oath:** Changed from Avraham's simple "sworn-oath," perhaps because it is reported from the servant's point of view.

50 **YHWH:** The family apparently worships the God of Avraham, in addition to others (see 31:19, 30).

53 **objects of silver . . . and gold and garments:** A stock biblical phrase (see, similarly, Ex. 3:22) for wealth or presents.

55 **a few days, perhaps ten:** Some interpret as "a year or ten months."

59 **with her nurse:** Yitzhak's life as the father of his people begins with the marriage arranged in this chapter; curiously, when he dies in Chapter 35, the nurse dies as well, perhaps to hint that Rivka dies too.

- 60 and they gave Rivka farewell-blessing and said to her:  
Our sister, may you become thousandfold myriads!  
May your seed inherit the gate of those who hate him!
- 61 Rivka and her maids arose, they mounted the camels and  
went after the man.  
The servant took Rivka and went away.
- 62 Now Yitzhak had come from where you come to the Well  
of the Living-One Who-Sees-Me—for he had settled in  
the Southland.
- 63 And Yitzhak went out to stroll in the field around eventide.  
He lifted up his eyes and saw: here, camels coming!
- 64 Rivka lifted up her eyes and saw Yitzhak;  
65 she got down from the camel and said to the servant:  
Who is the man over there that is walking in the field to  
meet us?  
The servant said:  
That is my lord.  
She took a veil and covered herself.
- 66 Now the servant recounted to Yitzhak all the things that he  
had done.
- 67 Yitzhak brought her into the tent of Sara his mother,  
he took Rivka and she became his wife, and he loved her.  
Thus was Yitzhak comforted after his mother.

- 25:1 Now Avraham had taken another wife, her name was  
Ketura.
- 2 She bore him Zimran and Yokshan, Medan and Midyan,  
Yishbak and Shuah.
- 3 Yokshan begot Sheva and Dedan,  
Dedan's sons were the Ashurites, the Letushites, and the  
Leummites.
- 4 Midyan's sons (were) Efa, Efer, Hanokh, Avida, and Eldaa.  
All these (were) Ketura's sons.
- 5 But Avraham gave over all that was his to Yitzhak.
- 6 And to the sons of the concubines that Avraham had,  
Avraham gave gifts, and he sent them away from Yitzhak  
his son while he was still alive, eastward, to the Eastland.
- 7 Now these are the days and years of the life of Avraham,  
which he lived:

- 8 A hundred years and seventy years and five years, then he  
breathed-his-last.  
Avraham died at a good ripe-age, old and abundant (in  
days),  
and was gathered to his kinspeople.
- 9 Yitzhak and Yishmael his sons buried him, in the cave of  
Makhpela, in the field of Efron son of Tzohar the Hittite,  
that faces Mamre,  
10 the field that Avraham had acquired from the Sons of  
Het.  
There were buried Avraham and Sara his wife.
- 11 Now it was after Avraham's death, that God blessed  
Yitzhak his son.  
And Yitzhak settled by the Well of the Living-One  
Who-Sees-Me.
- 12 Now these are the begettings of Yishmael son of Avraham,  
whom Hagar the Egyptian-woman, Sara's maid, bore to  
Avraham.
- 13 And these are the names of the sons of Yishmael, by their  
names after (the order of) their begettings:
- 

*Avraham's Descendants and Death* (25:1–18): Avraham's death is bracketed by two passages dealing with his offspring: first, through Ketura (a concubine), and then through Hagar (Yishmael's line). God's promise is on the way to fulfillment, although Yitzhak is as yet childless and only a small portion of the land has been permanently acquired.

- 60 **May your seed inherit the gate:** See Avraham's blessing in 22:17. Again, the matriarch shares in the blessing.
- 62 **Well of the Living-One:** Already a site of God's activity (16:14).
- 63 **stroll:** Hebrew obscure; some use "ponder."
- 67 **Sara:** As the story opened with Yitzhak's father in his last active moments, it closes with the memory of his mother. Yitzhak is on his own.
- 25:7 **days and years:** Lit. "days of the years."
- 8 **A hundred years . . . :** See "The Patriarchal Narratives," pp. 45–6.
- breathed-his-last:** Lit. "expired." It is translated as "perished" in 7:21. **abundant:** Or "full." For the complete expression, see 35:29.
- 11 **God blessed Yitzhak:** This is the first detail reported about Yitzhak after his father's death—lest there be any doubt about the continuation of God's care.

- 14 Yishmael's firstborn, Nevayot; and Kedar, Adbe'el,  
Mivsam, Mishma, Duma, Massa,  
15 Hadad and Tema, Yetur, Nafish and Kedma.  
16 These are the sons of Yishmael, these their names, in their  
villages and in their corrals,  
twelve princes for their tribes.  
17 And these are the years of the life of Yishmael: a hundred  
years and thirty years and seven years, then he  
breathed-his-last.  
He died and was gathered to his kinspeople.  
18 Now they dwelt from Havila to Shur, which faces Egypt,  
back to where you come toward Assyria;  
in the presence of all his brothers did (his inheritance) fall.

16 **corrals:** Others (including Buber) use "circled encampments." **twelve princes:** See 17:20.

18 **did (his inheritance) fall:** Hebrew difficult. Others interpret negatively, "made raids against" or "fell upon" (his kinsmen).

# PART III Yaakov

(25:19–36:43) see also 37–50

**B**EFORE COMMENTING on the Yaakov cycle, it is appropriate to consider why his father Yitzhak, the second of the Patriarchs, receives no true separate group of stories on his own.

Yitzhak functions in Genesis as a classic second generation—that is, as a transmitter and stabilizing force, rather than as an active participant in the process of building the people. There hardly exists a story about him in which he is anything but a son and heir, a husband, or a father. His main task in life seems to be to take roots in the land of Canaan, an admittedly important task in the larger context of God's promises in Genesis. What this means, unfortunately, is that he has almost no personality of his own. By Chapter 27, a scant two chapters after his father dies, he appears as (prematurely?) old, blind in both a literal and figurative sense, and as we will see, he fades out of the text entirely, only to die several chapters, and many years, later.

The true dynamic figure of the second generation here is Rivka. It is she to whom God reveals his plan, and she who puts into motion the mechanism for seeing that it is properly carried out. She is ultimately the one responsible for bridging the gap between the dream, as typified by Avraham, and the hard-won reality, as realized by Yaakov.

Avraham is a towering figure, almost unapproachable as a model in his intimacy with God and his ability to hurdle nearly every obstacle. Adding to this the fact that Yitzhak is practically a noncharacter, and that Yosef, once his rise begins, also lacks dimension as a personality, it becomes increasingly clear that it is Yaakov who emerges as the most dynamic and most human personality in the book. The stories about him cover fully half of Genesis, and reveal a man who is both troubled and triumphant. Most interestingly, he, and not Avraham, gives his name to the people of Israel.

Distinctive themes of the cycle include physical struggle, deception, and confrontation. These are expressed through the key words of Yaa-kov's name ("Heel-Holder" and "Heel-Sneak," then Yisrael, "God-Fighter"), "deceive" and similar words, and "face." Also recurring are the terms "love," "bless," "firstborn-right," and "wages/hire" (one word in Hebrew). The cycle is structured partly around etiologies (folk explanations of place-names and personal names) and also around Yaa-kov's use of stones in several of the stories.

Continuing from the Avraham cycle are such earlier themes as wandering, sibling rivalry, the barren wife, wives in conflict, the renaming of the protagonist, God perceived in dreams and visions; and particular geographical locations such as Bet-El, Shekhem, and the Negev (Cassuto).

Finally, it should be mentioned that the Yaakov stories are notable in the manner in which they portray the two levels of biblical reality: divine and human. Throughout the stories human beings act according to normal (though often strong) emotions, which God then uses to carry out his master plan. In this cycle one comes to feel the interpretive force of the biblical mind at work, understanding human events in the context of what God wills. It is a fascinating play between the ideas of fate and free will, destiny and choice—a paradox which nevertheless lies at the heart of the biblical conception of God and humankind.

- 19 Now these are the begettings of Yitzhak, son of Avraham.  
Avraham begot Yitzhak.
- 20 Yitzhak was forty years old when he took Rivka daughter of  
Betuel the Aramean, from the country of Aram, sister of  
Lavan the Aramean, for himself as a wife.
- 21 Yitzhak entreated YHWH on behalf of his wife, for she was  
barren,  
and YHWH granted-his-entreaty:  
Rivka his wife became pregnant.
- 22 But the children almost crushed one another inside her,  
so she said:  
If this be so,  
why do I exist?  
And she went to inquire of YHWH.

- 23 YHWH said to her:  
 Two nations are in your body,  
 two tribes from your belly shall be divided;  
 tribe shall be mightier than tribe,  
 elder shall be servant to younger!
- 24 When her days were fulfilled for bearing, here: twins were  
 in her body!
- 25 The first one came out ruddy, like a hairy mantle all over,  
 so they called his name: Esav/Rough-One.
- 26 After that his brother came out, his hand grasping Esav's  
 heel,  
 so they called his name: Yaakov/Heel-Holder.  
 Yitzhak was sixty years old when she bore them.
- 

*Rivka's Children* (25:19–34): Two stories of sibling confrontation begin the Yaakov cycle. From the first, verses 19–28, all the necessary conditions are introduced for what is to come: struggle in the womb (foreshadowing Yaakov's wrestling match in Chapter 32, the structural resolution of this earlier one), God's plan for the younger son to outdo the older one, the importance of names as clues to personalities, and parental preference. This last point seals the fate of the two boys.

The second story (vv.29–34) is Yaakov's first act of stealth, and sets the pattern for his whole life. Note at the same time the text's emphasis on Esav's role (v.34), "Thus did Esav despise the firstborn-right."

- 20 **forty years old**: Another schematic number. Twenty years later (see verse 26), his wife will bear him children. **Aramean**: Three times in this verse the root "Aram" confirms what we learned in the previous chapter—the importance of family and lineage here. **country of Aram**: Others leave this untranslated, as "Padan-Aram."
- 22 **almost crushed**: Others use "struggled." **inquire**: Consult an oracle. Note that there is no indication that Yitzhak is aware of what God wants.
- 23 **tribes**: Heb. *le'ummim*, a poetic term for "peoples."
- 24 **here**: The text speaks from the point of view of the onlookers, not of Rivka, who is perfectly aware that she has twins.
- 25 **Esav**: Trad. English "Esau." **Rough-One**: A conjectural interpretation from Arabic *'athaya*.
- 26 **Yaakov**: Trad. English "Jacob." **Heel-Holder**: A popular reinterpretation of the name Yaakov, which may have meant originally "May (God) protect."

- 27 The lads grew up:  
Esav became a man who knew the hunt, a man of the field,  
but Yaakov was a plain man, staying among the tents.
- 28 Yitzhak grew to love Esav, for (he brought) hunted-game  
for his mouth,  
but Rivka loved Yaakov.

29 Once Yaakov was boiling boiled-stew,  
when Esav came in from the field, and he was weary.

30 Esav said to Yaakov:  
Pray give me a gulp of the red-stuff, that red-stuff,  
for I am so weary!  
Therefore they called his name: Edom/Red-One.

31 Yaakov said:  
Sell me your firstborn-right here-and-now.

32 Esav said:  
Here, I am on my way to dying, so what good to me is a  
firstborn-right?

33 Yaakov said:  
Swear to me here-and-now.  
He swore to him and sold his firstborn-right to Yaakov.

34 Yaakov gave Esav bread and boiled lentils;  
he ate and drank and arose and went off.  
Thus did Esav despise the firstborn-right.

26:1 Now there was a famine in the land, aside from the former  
famine which there had been in the days of Avraham,  
so Yitzhak went to Avimelekh, king of the Philistines, to  
Gerar.

2 And YHWH was seen by him and said:  
Do not go down to Egypt;  
continue to dwell in the land that I tell you of,  
3 sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will give  
you blessing—  
for to you and to your seed I give all these lands  
and will fulfill the sworn-oath that I swore to Avraham your  
father:

4 I will make your seed many, like the stars of the heavens,  
and to your seed I will give all these lands;

all the nations of the earth shall enjoy blessing through your seed—

- 5 in consequence of Avraham's hearkening to my voice  
and keeping what I would have him keep: my  
commandments, my laws, and my instructions.  
6 So Yitzhak stayed in Gerar.

As before, these episodes point in two temporal directions. Esav resembles Yishmael, the man of the bow; and parental preference will launch the initially tragic action in the Yosef story (Chapter 37).

*In the Land* (26:1–6): As we have suggested, there is no true collection of stories about Yitzhak. That is, virtually nowhere does Yitzhak appear in a tale where, as a distinct individual, he is a central character. And unlike Yaakov and Yosef, Yitzhak never directly receives his father's blessing. This is bestowed by God, and one gets the impression that even Avraham does not deal with his son as an individual. This is not surprising, given Yitzhak's function in his father's life.

For the narrative, his main purpose, as we have stressed above, is simply to remain in the land (note the repetition of the word "land" in this section). It is almost as if Avraham, the man who lives in the shadow of sacred trees, plants one in the person of his son. In this chapter Yitzhak is forbidden to go beyond the borders of Canaan. Even his death, so seemingly out of place in Chapter 35, occurs after Yaakov has returned home from his wanderings: only when it is assured that there will be continuity in the land is he allowed to die—despite the fact that as a result the text must leave him blind and dying for twenty years.

27 **plain**: Hebrew unclear. Others use "simple."

28 **(he brought) hunted-game**: Hebrew difficult.

29 **boiling boiled-stew**: This phrase may connote plotting, as in our English "cook up," "brew," "concoct," or "stir up" trouble. Other forms of the Hebrew verb denote "insolence."

31 **here-and-now**: Others use "at once"; apparently a legal term.

34 **he ate . . .**: Esav's impulsive personality is brilliantly portrayed by the use of four rapid-fire verbs. **despise**: Others use "belittle."

26:1 **a famine . . . Yitzhak went to Avimelekh**: Parallel to the story in Chapter 20.

5 **in consequence of Avraham's hearkening . . .**: The blessing mirrors 22:17ff. **my commandments . . .**: These are not specified; this is probably a poetic phrase describing a general idea.

- 7 Now when the men of the place asked about his wife, he said: She is my sister,  
for he was afraid to say: my wife—  
(thinking): Otherwise the people of the place will kill me on account of Rivka, for she is beautiful to look at.
- 8 But it was, when he had been there a long time, that Avimelekh, king of the Philistines, looked out through a window  
and saw: there was Yitzhak laughing-and-loving with Rivka his wife!
- 9 Avimelekh had Yitzhak called and said:  
But here, she must be your wife!  
Now how could you say: She is my sister?  
Yitzhak said to him:  
Indeed, I said to myself: Otherwise I will die on account of her!
- 10 Avimelekh said:  
What is this that you have done to us!  
One of the people might well have lain with your wife, and then you would have brought guilt upon us!
- 11 Avimelekh charged the entire people, saying:  
Whoever touches this man or his wife must be put to death, yes, death!
- 12 Yitzhak sowed in that land, and reaped in that year a hundred measures;  
thus did YHWH bless him.
- 13 The man became great, and went on, went on becoming greater, until he was exceedingly great:
- 14 he had herds of sheep and herds of oxen and a large retinue of servants,  
and the Philistines envied him.
- 15 And all the wells which his father's servants had dug in the days of Avraham his father, the Philistines stopped up and filled with earth.
- 16 Avimelekh said to Yitzhak:  
Go away from us, for you have become exceedingly more numerous than we!

- 17 So Yitzhak went from there, he encamped in the wadi of Gerar and settled there.
- 18 Yitzhak again dug up the wells of water which had been dug in the days of Avraham his father, the Philistines having stopped them up after Avraham's death, and he called them by the names, the same names, by which his father had called them.
- 19 Yitzhak's servants also dug in the wadi, and found there a well of living water.
- 20 Now the shepherds of Gerar quarreled with the shepherds of Yitzhak, saying: The water is ours!  
So he called the name of the well: Esek/Bickering, because they had bickered with him.
- 21 They dug another well, and quarreled also over it, so he called its name: Sitna/Animosity.
- 

*The Wife—III* (26:7-11): Here is the final "Yitzhak version" of the tale, constructed around the same king whom Avraham had encountered in Chapter 20. Its individual coloring is supplied by the "laughing-and-loving" of verse 8, playing on Yitzhak's name. Otherwise, just as in the following episode, he is merely repeating his father's experience.

*Blessing* (26:12-33): Confirmation of Yitzhak's status as heir comes in verses 12-14, in the form of material blessings (already referred to immediately after Avraham's death, 25:11). It will be Yaakov's task to reclaim and continue the spiritual side of the tradition.

The first episode is centered around not Yitzhak but Avraham. The phrase "his father" reverberates; again Avimelekh returns. In the second episode, Avraham's treaty with that king (Chapter 21) is replayed, with the same result as before: an explanation of the name Be'er-Sheva.

8 **laughing-and-loving**: Heb. *metzahek*, which can mean laughter or sexual activity. Trad. English "sporting."

11 **touches**: Or "harms."

12 **reaped**: Lit. "attained."

17 **there**: The word occurs seven times through verse 25. It may be a counterpoint to Chapter 24's usage, or stress that Yitzhak stays in the land.

- 22 He moved on from there and dug another well, but they did not quarrel over it,  
so he called its name: Rehovot/Space,  
and said: Indeed, now YHWH has made space for us, so that we may bear fruit in the land!
- 23 He went up from there to Be'er-Sheva.
- 24 Now YHWH was seen by him on that night and said:  
I am the God of Avraham your father.  
Do not be afraid, for I am with you,  
I will bless you and will make your seed many, for the sake of Avraham my servant.
- 25 He built a slaughter-site there  
and called out the name of YHWH.  
He spread his tent there, and Yitzhak's servants excavated a well there.
- 26 Now Avimelekh went to him from Gerar, along with  
Ahuzzat his aide and Pikhoh the commander of his army.
- 27 Yitzhak said to them:  
Why have you come to me?  
For you hate me and have sent me away from you!
- 28 They said:  
We have seen, yes, seen that YHWH has been with you,  
so we say: Pray let there be a binding-oath between us,  
between us and you,  
we want to cut a covenant with you:
- 29 If ever you should deal badly with us . . . !  
Just as we have not harmed you and just as we have only dealt well with you and have sent you away in peace—  
you are now blessed by YHWH!
- 30 He made them a drinking-feast, and they ate and drank.
- 31 They (arose) early in the morning and swore to one another;  
then Yitzhak sent them off, and they went from him in peace.
- 32 Now it was on that same day  
that Yitzhak's servants came and told him about the well  
that they had been digging,  
they said to him: We have found water!

33 So he called it: Shiv'a/Swearing-Seven;  
therefore the name of the city is Be'er-Sheva until this day.

34 When Esav was forty years old, he took to wife Yehudit  
daughter of B'eri the Hittite and Ba'semat daughter of  
Elon the Hittite.

35 And they were a bitterness of spirit to Yitzhak and Rivka.

27:1 Now when Yitzhak was old and his eyes had become too  
dim for seeing,

he called Esav, his elder son, and said to him:

My son!

He said to him:

Here I am.

2 He said:

Now here, I have grown old, and do not know the day of  
my death.

3 So now, pray pick up your weapons—your hanging-quiver  
and your bow,  
go out into the field and hunt me down some hunted-game,

---

*Deceit and Blessing* (26:34 to 28:9): Of all the stories of Genesis, this is perhaps the most brilliantly staged. Nowhere is the narrative so vivid as here, and nowhere, even including Chapter 22, is the tension so masterfully drawn out.

Despite the fact that the story line is a simple one, involving deception and the “taking” of the blessing, the text is imbued with great subtlety. Most striking is the sensuality it invokes: seven times we hear of “game,” six of the “delicacy” (or “tasty-dish”), and three times Yitzhak “feels” Yaakov (who “comes close” four times). In fact the story makes use of all five of the senses. One sense—that of sight— is defective, and

26 **aide**: Lit. “friend.”

30 **they ate and drank**: The cutting of a covenant is often accompanied by a meal in biblical and other societies.

34 **forty years old**: The same age that his father was at the time of his marriage.

- 4 and make me a delicacy, such as I love;  
bring it to me, and I will eat it,  
that I may give you my own blessing before I die.
- 5 Now Rivka was listening as Yitzhak spoke to Esav his son,  
and so when Esav went off into the fields to hunt down  
hunted-game to bring (to him),
- 6 Rivka said to Yaakov her son, saying:  
Here, I was listening as your father spoke to Esav your  
brother, saying:
- 7 Bring me some hunted-game and make me a delicacy, I will  
eat it  
and give you blessing before YHWH, before my death.
- 8 So now, my son, listen to my voice, to what I command  
you:
- 9 Pray go to the flock and take me two fine goat kids from  
there,  
I will make them into a delicacy for your father, such as he  
loves;
- 10 you bring it to your father, and he will eat,  
so that he may give you blessing before his death.
- 11 Yaakov said to Rivka his mother:  
Here, Esav my brother is a hairy man, and I am a smooth  
man,
- 12 perhaps my father will feel me—then I will be like a  
trickster in his eyes,  
and I will bring a curse and not a blessing on myself!
- 13 His mother said to him:  
Let your curse be on me, my son!  
Only: listen to my voice and go, take them for me.
- 14 He went and took and brought them to his mother,  
and his mother made a delicacy, such as his father loved.
- 15 Rivka then took the garments of Esav, her elder son, the  
choicest ones that were with her in the house,
- 16 and clothed Yaakov, her younger son;  
and with the skins of the goat kids, she clothed his hands  
and the smooth-parts of his neck.
- 17 Then she placed the delicacy and the bread that she had  
made in the hand of Yaakov her son.

- 18 He came to his father and said:  
 Father!  
 He said:  
 Here I am. Which one are you, my son?
- 19 Yaakov said to his father:  
 I am Esav, your firstborn.  
 I have done as you spoke to me:  
 Pray arise, sit and eat from my hunted-game,  
 that you may give me your own blessing.
- 

on that deficiency will turn the action of the story. Yet another level of meaning is apparent: “to see” in ancient Israel, as in many cultures, was a term connected to prophetic powers, as we observed regarding Avraham. So here, ironically, Yitzhak’s blindness leads to both deception and to the proper transferral of the blessing.

Structurally the story is framed by two references to Esav and his wives: 26:34–35 prepares the way for his loss of the blessing, by showing that he has alienated himself from his parents (and broken Avraham’s charge to Yitzhak in 24:3), and 28:6–9 finds Esav obeying his father and making a rather pathetic attempt to reassure himself of his love.

Some of the story’s motifs will return later. The threefold “as he loves” looks to the crucial role that the theme of “love” will play later on in Genesis (as well as being a key to the story itself). The general theme of nonrecognition will return with an interesting twist in the Yosef novella (especially in Chapters 42–44).

- 27:4 **delicacy**: See 25:28. Yitzhak is tied to the senses, a trait that he prizes in Esav. **my own blessing**: Or “my special blessing.” Heb. *nefesh* frequently means “self” or “personality.”
- 7 **before YHWH**: Note that Rivka adds these words to her husband’s.
- 9 **take**: Fetch (see also verses 13, 14, 45).
- 13 **Let your curse be on me**: Ominously, Rivka disappears from the narrative after verse 46.
- 18 **Which one are you**: Three times—here, in verse 21, and in verse 24—the father asks for assurances about the son’s identity. **my son**: This phrase reverberates throughout the story, underlining the confusion over the identity of the sons.
- 19 **Esav, your firstborn**: From the first word the lie is blatant; contrast Esav’s tension-filled reply to the same question in verse 32.

- 20 Yitzhak said to his son:  
How did you find it so hastily, my son?  
He said: Indeed, YHWH your God made it happen for me.
- 21 Yitzhak said to Yaakov:  
Pray come closer, that I may feel you, my son,  
whether you are really my son Esav or not.
- 22 Yaakov moved closer to Yitzhak his father.  
He felt him and said:  
The voice is Yaakov's voice, the hands are Esav's hands—
- 23 but he did not recognize him, for his hands were like the  
hands of Esav his brother, hairy.  
Now he was about to bless him,
- 24 when he said:  
Are you he, my son Esav?  
He said:  
I am.
- 25 So he said: Bring it close to me, and I will eat from the  
hunted-game of my son,  
in order that I may give you my own blessing.  
He put it close to him and he ate,  
he brought him wine and he drank.
- 26 Then Yitzhak his father said to him:  
Pray come close and kiss me, my son.
- 27 He came close and kissed him.  
Now he smelled the smell of his garments  
and blessed him and said:  
See, the smell of my son  
is like the smell of a field  
that YHWH has blessed.
- 28 So may God give you  
from the dew of the heavens,  
from the fat of the earth,  
(along with) much grain and new-wine!
- 29 May peoples serve you,  
may tribes bow down to you;  
be master to your brothers,  
may your mother's sons bow down to you!  
Those who curse you, cursed!  
Those who bless you, blessed!

- 30 Now it was, when Yitzhak had finished blessing Yaakov,  
yes it was—Yaakov had just gone out, out from the  
presence of Yitzhak his father—  
that Esav his brother came back from his hunting.
- 31 He too made a delicacy and brought it to his father.  
He said to his father:  
Let my father arise and eat from the hunted-game of his  
son,  
that you may give me your own blessing.
- 32 Yitzhak his father said to him:  
Which one are you?  
He said:  
I am your son, your firstborn, Esav.
- 33 Yitzhak trembled with very great trembling  
and said:  
Who then was he  
that hunted down hunted-game and brought it to me—I ate  
it all before you came  
and I gave him my blessing!  
Now blessed he must remain!
- 34 When Esav heard the words of his father,  
he cried out with a very great and bitter cry,  
and said to his father:  
Bless me, me also, father!

- 
- 20 **made it happen:** An appropriate expression to use with Yitzhak; see 24:12.
- 23 **hairy:** In the end Yitzhak relies more on the sense of touch than on his hearing. Yet the latter is usually regarded as the source of truth in the Bible (see Deut. 4:12, for example).
- 27 **a field:** Fitting for Esav, the “man of the field” (25:27).
- 29 **Those who bless you, blessed!:** Perhaps hearkening back to God’s speech to Avraham in 12:3. Note that this blessing, at least in this particular wording, is never spoken to Yitzhak.
- 32 **Esav:** The exact identification is put off until the end of the sequence, heightening the drama. Similarly, see 22:2.
- 33,34 **very great:** Movingly, the father’s terror and the son’s anguish mirror one another via use of the same phrase (Heb. *ad me’od*, which is rare).
- 33 **blessed he must remain:** Once uttered, the words of blessing cannot be rescinded.

- 35 He said:  
Your brother came with deceit and took away your blessing.
- 36 He said:  
Is that why his name was called Yaakov/Heel-Sneak? For he  
has now sneaked against me twice:  
My firstborn-right he took, and now he has taken my  
blessing!  
And he said:  
Haven't you reserved a blessing for me?
- 37 Yitzhak answered, saying to Esav:  
Here, I have made him master to you,  
and all his brothers I have given him as servants,  
with grain and new-wine I have invested him—  
so for you, what then can I do, my son?
- 38 Esav said to his father:  
Have you only a single blessing, father?  
Bless me, me also, father!  
And Esav lifted up his voice and wept.
- 39 Then Yitzhak his father answered, saying to him:  
Behold, from the fat of the earth  
must be your dwelling-place,  
from the dew of the heavens above.
- 40 You will live by your sword,  
you will serve your brother.  
But it will be  
that when you brandish it,  
you will tear his yoke from your neck.
- 41 Now Esav held a grudge against Yaakov because of the  
blessing with which his father had blessed him.  
Esav said in his heart:  
Let the days of mourning for my father draw near  
and then I will kill Yaakov my brother!
- 42 Rivka was told of the words of Esav, her elder son.  
She sent and called for Yaakov, her younger son,  
and said to him:  
Here, Esav your brother is consoling himself about you,  
with (the thought of) killing you.
- 43 So now, my son, listen to my voice:  
Arise and flee to Lavan my brother in Harran,

- 44 and stay with him for a few days, until your brother's fury  
has turned away,
- 45 until his anger turns away from you and he forgets what  
you did to him.  
Then I will send and have you taken from there—  
for should I be bereaved of you both in a single day?
- 46 So Rivka said to Yitzhak:  
I loathe my life because of those Hittite women;  
if Yaakov should take a wife from the Hittite women—like  
these, from the women of the land,  
why should I have life?
- 28:1 So Yitzhak called for Yaakov,  
he blessed him and charged him, saying to him:  
You are not to take a wife from the women of Canaan;  
2 arise, go to the country of Aram, to the house of Betuel,  
your mother's father,  
and take yourself a wife from there, from the daughters of  
Lavan, your mother's brother.
- 3 May God Shaddai bless you,  
may he make you bear fruit and make you many,  
so that you become a host of peoples.
- 4 And may he give you the blessing of Avraham,  
to you and to your seed with you,  
for you to inherit the land of your sojournings,  
which God gave to Avraham.

- 36 **Heel-Sneak:** In effect, Esav puts a curse on his brother's name, which will  
be removed only in 32:29, twenty years later. **he has now sneaked  
against me:** Or "cheated me."
- 37 **invested:** Or "sustained."
- 39 **Behold, from the fat of the earth:** Some interpret this negatively as "Be-  
hold, *away* from the fat of the earth. . . ."
- 40 **brandish:** I.e., a sword; Hebrew obscure.
- 41 **let the days . . . :** That is, wait until my father dies!
- 44 **days:** May be an idiomatic usage meaning "years."
- 45 **Then I will send:** This never occurs in the later course of the story.
- 28:2 **arise, go to the country of Aram:** It is curious that Yitzhak sends his son  
on a journey that he himself had been forbidden to undertake.
- 4 **seed . . . land:** Again the two elements of the blessing given to Avraham.

- 5 So Yitzhak sent Yaakov off;  
he went to the country of Aram, to Lavan son of Betuel the  
Aramean,  
the brother of Rivka, the mother of Yaakov and Esav.
- 6 Now Esav saw  
that Yitzhak had given Yaakov farewell-blessing and had  
sent him to the country of Aram, to take himself a wife  
from there,  
(and that) when he had given him blessing, he had charged  
him, saying: You are not to take a wife from the women  
of Canaan!
- 7 And Yaakov had listened to his father and his mother and  
had gone to the country of Aram.
- 8 And Esav saw  
that the women of Canaan were bad in the eyes of Yitzhak  
his father,
- 9 so Esav went to Yishmael and took Mahalat daughter of  
Yishmael son of Avraham, sister of Nevayot, in addition  
to his wives as a wife.
- 10 Yaakov went out from Be'er-Sheva and went toward  
Harran,
- 11 and encountered a certain place.  
He had to spend the night there, for the sun had set.  
Now he took one of the stones of the place  
and set it at his head  
and lay down in that place.
- 12 And he dreamt:  
Here, a ladder was set up on the earth,  
its top reaching the heavens,  
and here: messengers of God were going up and down on it.
- 13 And here:  
YHWH was standing over against him.  
He said:  
I am YHWH,  
the God of Avraham your father and the God of Yitzhak.  
The land on which you lie  
I give to you and to your seed.

- 14 Your seed will be like the dust of the earth;  
 you will burst forth, seaward, eastward, northward,  
 southward.  
 All the clans of the soil will find blessing through you and  
 through your seed!
- 15 Here, I am with you,  
 I will watch over you wherever you go  
 and will bring you back to this soil;  
 indeed, I will not leave you  
 until I have done what I have spoken to you.
- 

*Yaakov Sets Out* (28:10-22): Yaakov's journey takes him not only to a foreign land, but to the portals of adulthood. It begins fittingly with a dream vision, so that we will know from the start that God is with him. In fact Yaakov always encounters God at crucial life junctures, at the point of journeys (31:3—leaving Aram; 32:25ff.—meeting Esav; 35:1—returning to Bet-El; 35:9ff.—the homecoming; and 46:2ff.—on the way to Egypt).

The setting for this particular encounter is highly unusual, especially when compared to the generally nongeographical nature of the revelations to Avraham. The idea of a sacred site ("place," a biblical word with these connotations, occurs three times) is strongly suggested. The notion of a ladder or ramp (or "gateway," v.17) between the divine and human worlds is well known in ancient stories. A variation of the theme occurs in 32:2-3, where Yaakov sees "messengers" again in an "encounter"; these two stories frame the middle of the entire cycle.

As Yaakov enters his adult life, he resembles both his grandfather Avraham, the visionary, and his son Yosef, the dreamer.

- 5 **Yaakov and Esav:** In the end, the oracle to Rivka is confirmed, with younger son superseding elder.
- 6 **charged:** Or "commanded."
- 12 **Here:** The word (three times) emphasizes the immediacy of the report; it is the vocabulary of dreams, as in 37:7 (Andersen). **ladder:** Others use "ramp" or "stairway."
- 13 **over against:** See note to 18:2.
- 13ff. **the land, etc.:** Once again Yaakov receives the blessing of Avraham "his father" (!). See 13:14-16.

- 16 Yaakov awoke from his sleep  
and said:  
Why,  
YHWH is in this place,  
and I, I did not know it!
- 17 He was awestruck and said:  
How awesome is this place!  
This is none other than a house of God,  
and that is the gate of heaven!
- 18 Yaakov (arose) early in the morning,  
he took the stone that he had set at his head  
and set it up as a standing-pillar  
and poured oil on top of it.
- 19 And he called the name of the place: Bet-El/House of  
God—  
however, Luz was the name of the city in former times.
- 20 And Yaakov vowed a vow, saying:  
If God will be with me  
and will watch over me on this way that I go  
and will give me food to eat and a garment to wear,  
21 and if I come back in peace to my father's house—  
YHWH shall be God to me,  
22 and this stone that I have set up as a standing-pillar shall  
become a house of God,  
and everything that you give me  
I shall tithe, tithe it to you.

- 29:1 Yaakov lifted his feet and went to the land of the  
Easterners.
- 2 He looked around him, and there: a well in the field, and  
there were three herds of sheep crouching near it,  
for from that well they used to give the herds to drink.  
Now the stone on the mouth of the well was large,  
3 so when all the herds were gathered there,  
they used to roll the stone from the mouth of the well, give  
the sheep to drink, and put the stone back on the mouth  
of the well in its place.

- 4 Now Yaakov said to them:  
 Brothers, where are you from?  
 They said:  
 We are from Harran.
- 5 He said to them:  
 Do you know Lavan, son of Nahor?  
 They said:  
 We know him.
- 6 He said to them:  
 Is all well with him?  
 They said:  
 It is well—  
 and here comes Rahel his daughter with the sheep!
- 7 He said:  
 Indeed, it is still broad daylight,  
 it is not time to gather in the livestock,  
 so give the sheep to drink and go back, tend them.
- 

*Arrival in Aram* (29:1–14): As one might expect from the usual biblical pattern, Yaakov meets his bride-to-be at a well. As in other ancient stories (see also Ex. 2:15–17) the hero performs a feat of physical strength, this time with a large stone—continuing the use of stones as a motif in the Yaakov stories.

Lavan is once again the chief representative of the family, as he was in the betrothal account of Chapter 24.

- 18 **standing-pillar**: A stone marker, common to the culture of the region.  
**Bet-El**: Trad. English “Beth El.”
- 21 **in peace**: Or “safely.” This functions as a key word in the Yaakov cycle, extending into the Yosef story as well. Yaakov, the “sneak” and wanderer, seeks peace and safety; he does not find it until the end of his life, albeit in a foreign land.
- 22 **tithe**: See note to 14:20.
- 29:1 **lifted his feet**: Colloquially, “picked up and went.”
- 5 **We know him**: Biblical Hebrew expresses the idea “yes” by repeating the words of the question. See also verse 6 and 24:58.
- 6 **Rahel**: Trad. English “Rachel.” The name means “ewe.”
- 7 **to gather in**: For the night.

- 8 But they said:  
We cannot, until all the herds have been gathered;  
only then do they roll the stone from the mouth of the well,  
and then we give the sheep to drink.
- 9 While he was still speaking with them,  
Rahel came with the sheep that were her father's  
—for she was a shepherdess.
- 10 Now it was when Yaakov saw Rahel, the daughter of Lavan  
and the sheep of Lavan his mother's brother,  
that Yaakov came close,  
he rolled the stone from the mouth of the well  
and gave drink to the sheep of Lavan his mother's brother.
- 11 Then Yaakov kissed Rahel, and lifted up his voice and  
wept.
- 12 And Yaakov told Rahel  
that he was her father's brother  
and that he was Rivka's son.  
She ran and told her father.
- 13 Now it was, as soon as Lavan heard the tidings concerning  
Yaakov, his sister's son,  
that he ran to meet him, embraced him and kissed him, and  
brought him into his house.  
And he recounted all these events to Lavan.
- 14 Lavan said to him:  
Without doubt you are my bone, my flesh!  
And he stayed with him the days of a  
Renewing-of-the-Moon.
- 15 Lavan said to Yaakov:  
Just because you are my brother, should you serve me for  
nothing?  
Tell me, what shall your wages be?
- 16 Now Lavan had two daughters: the name of the elder was  
Lea, the name of the younger was Rahel.
- 17 Lea's eyes were delicate, but Rahel was fair of form and fair  
to look at.
- 18 And Yaakov fell in love with Rahel.  
He said:  
I will serve you seven years for Rahel, your younger  
daughter.

- 19 Lavan said:  
My giving her to you is better than my giving her to  
another man;  
stay with me.
- 20 So Yaakov served seven years for Rahel,  
yet they were in his eyes as but a few days, because of his  
love for her.
- 21 Then Yaakov said to Lavan:  
Come-now, (give me) my wife, for my days-of-labor have  
been fulfilled,  
so that I may come in to her.
- 22 Lavan gathered all the people of the place together and  
made a drinking-feast.
- 23 Now in the evening  
he took Lea his daughter and brought her to him,  
and he came in to her.
- 24 Lavan also gave her Zilpa his maid,  
for Lea his daughter as a maid.
- 25 Now in the morning:  
here, she was Lea!  
He said to Lavan:  
What is this that you have done to me!

---

*Deception Repaid* (29:15–30): The language of the text here, as well as the tenor of the situation, suggest that the Bible has set up Yaakov's punishment for having stolen Yitzhak's blessing from his brother. "Deceived" (v.25) and "younger . . . firstborn" (v.26) echo the Chapter 27 narrative, and provide another example of biblical justice.

- 10 **his mother's brother**: Three times here, to accentuate the familial ties.
- 12 **brother**: Relative (so also verse 15).
- 14 **Renewing-of-the-Moon**: Heb. *hodesh*, a month.
- 16 **Lea**: Trad. English "Leah." The name means "wild cow."
- 17 **delicate**: Others use "weak." Either the term is meant negatively or else Lea is being praised for one attribute but Rahel for total beauty.
- 18 **seven**: Aside from forty, this is the other schematic number found often in Genesis and elsewhere (for instance, as the basic number of the biblical calendar, in days, months, and years).
- 19 **with me**: Or "in my service," "under me."
- 21 **fulfilled**: I.e., over, completed.

- Was it not for Rahel that I served you?  
Why have you deceived me?
- 26 Lavan said:  
Such is not done in our place, giving away the younger  
before the firstborn;
- 27 just fill out the bridal-week for this one, then we shall give  
you that one also,  
for the service which you will serve me for yet another  
seven years.
- 28 Yaakov did so—he fulfilled the bridal-week for this one,  
and then he gave him Rahel his daughter as a wife.
- 29 Lavan also gave Rahel his daughter Bilha his maid,  
for her as a maid.
- 30 So he came in to Rahel also,  
and he loved Rahel also,  
more than Lea.  
Then he served him for yet another seven years.
- 31 Now when YHWH saw that Lea was hated,  
he opened her womb,  
while Rahel was barren.
- 32 So Lea became pregnant and bore a son;  
she called his name: Re'uven/See, a Son!  
for she said:  
Indeed, YHWH has seen my being afflicted,  
indeed, now my husband will love me!
- 33 She became pregnant again and bore a son,  
and said:  
Indeed, YHWH has heard that I am hated,  
so he has given me this one as well!  
And she called his name: Shim'on/Hearing.
- 34 She became pregnant again and bore a son,  
and said:  
Now this time my husband will be joined to me,  
for I have borne him three sons!  
Therefore they called his name: Levi/Joining.
- 35 She became pregnant again and bore a son,  
and said:  
This time I will give thanks to YHWH!

Therefore she called his name: Yehuda/Giving-Thanks.  
Then she stopped giving birth.

- 30:1 Now when Rahel saw that she could not bear (children) to  
Yaakov,  
Rahel envied her sister.  
She said to Yaakov:  
Come-now, (give) me children!  
If not, I will die!
- 2 Yaakov's anger raged against Rahel,  
he said:  
Am I in place of God,  
who has denied you fruit of the body?
- 3 She said:  
Here is my slave-girl Bilha;  
come in to her,  
so that she may give birth upon my knees, so that I too may  
be built-up-with-sons through her.
- 4 She gave him Bilha her maid as a wife,  
and Yaakov came in to her.
- 5 Bilha became pregnant and bore Yaakov a son.
- 

*Love, Jealousy, and Children* (29:31–30:24): The narrative now demonstrates (1) how Yaakov prospers in exile, increasing both in wealth and in progeny, and thus (2) how God fulfills his promise to the Patriarchs to “make them many.” Characteristically for the Bible, this takes place as a result of human emotions: the jealousy of two sisters who are married to the same man. The emotions, interestingly, are portrayed largely through the names given to Yaakov's sons. In the end Lea seems to be the victor, at least in the terms of a culture that prizes the production of male children; she becomes the mother of fully half of the sons of Israel (Redak).

31 **hated:** Others use “rejected,” “unloved.”

32 **Re'uven:** Trad. English “Reuben.”

33 **Shim'on:** Trad. English “Simeon.”

35 **Yehuda:** Trad. English “Judah.”

30:3 **give birth upon my knees:** An idiom for legal adoption (here, by Rahel).

- 6 Rahel said:  
God has done-me-justice; yes, he has heard my voice!  
He has given me a son!  
Therefore she called his name: Dan/He-Has-Done-Justice.
- 7 And Bilha, Rahel's maid, became pregnant again and bore a second son to Yaakov.
- 8 Rahel said:  
A struggle of God have I struggled with my sister; yes, I have prevailed!  
So she called his name: Naftali/My Struggle.
- 9 Now when Lea saw that she had stopped giving birth, she took Zilpa her maid and gave her to Yaakov as a wife.
- 10 Zilpa, Lea's maid, bore Yaakov a son.
- 11 Lea said:  
What fortune!  
So she called his name: Gad/Fortune.
- 12 And Zilpa, Lea's maid, bore a second son to Yaakov.
- 13 Lea said:  
What happiness!  
For women will deem me happy.  
So she called his name: Asher/Happiness.
- 14 Now Re'uven went in the days of the wheat-harvest and found some love-apples in the field, and brought them to Lea his mother.  
Rahel said to Lea:  
Pray give me (some) of your son's love-apples!
- 15 She said to her:  
Is your taking away my husband such a small thing that you would now take away my son's love-apples?  
Rahel said:  
Very well, he may lie with you tonight in exchange for your son's love-apples.
- 16 So when Yaakov came home from the fields in the evening, Lea went out to meet him and said:  
You must come in to me,  
for I have hired, yes, hired you for my son's love-apples.  
So he lay with her that night.
- 17 And God hearkened to Lea,

- so that she became pregnant and bore Yaakov a fifth son.
- 18 Lea said:  
 God has given me my hired-wages,  
 because I gave my maid to my husband!  
 So she called his name: Yissakhar/There-Is-Hire.
- 19 Once again Lea became pregnant, and she bore a sixth son  
 to Yaakov.
- 20 Lea said:  
 God has presented me with a good present,  
 this time my husband will prize me—  
 for I have borne him six sons!  
 So she called his name: Zevulun/Prince.
- 21 Afterward she bore a daughter, and called her name Dina.
- 22 But God kept Rahel in mind,  
 God hearkened to her and opened her womb,
- 23 so that she became pregnant and bore a son.  
 She said:  
 God has removed/*asaf*  
 my reproach!
- 24 So she called his name: Yosef,  
 saying:  
 May YHWH add/*yosef*  
 another son to me!

- 
- 13 **What happiness:** Others use “Happy am I!”
- 14 **love-apples:** Heb. *duda'im*; a plant believed to have aphrodisiac powers. Others use “mandrakes.”
- 15 **taking away:** The theme of “taking,” so prominent in Chapter 27, returns, in the context of sibling rivalry again.
- 18 **hired-wages:** “Wages” recurs as a theme throughout this part of the Yaakov cycle (Fokkelman). It is perhaps a veiled portrayal of the events of Yaakov’s adulthood as “payment” for what he did to his brother. **Yissakhar:** Trad. English “Issachar.”
- 20 **this time my husband will prize me:** Lea’s six pregnancies and birthings are bracketed by this verse and 29:32, “Now my husband will love me.” **Zevulun:** Trad. English “Zebulun.”
- 23–24 **removed. . . . add:** Yosef’s naming prefigures his destiny as a son lost and found.
- 24 **Yosef:** Trad. English “Joseph.”

- 25 Now it was, once Rahel had borne Yosef, that Yaakov said  
to Lavan:  
Send me free, that I may go back to my place, to my land,  
26 give over my wives and my children,  
for whom I have served you,  
and I will go.  
Indeed, you yourself know my service that I have served  
you!
- 27 Lavan said to him:  
Pray, if I have found favor in your eyes . . .  
I have become wealthy,  
and YHWH has blessed me on account of you.
- 28 And he said: Specify the wages due you from me, and I will  
give you payment.
- 29 He said to him:  
You yourself know  
how I have served you,  
and how it has gone with your livestock in my charge.
- 30 For you had but few before me,  
and they have since burst out into a multitude.  
Thus has YHWH blessed you at my every step!  
But now, when may I too do something for my household?
- 31 He said:  
What shall I give you?  
Yaakov said:  
You are not to give me anything—  
only do this thing for me,  
then I will return, I will tend your flock, I will keep watch:
- 32 Let me go over your whole flock today  
removing from there every speckled and dappled head;  
and every dark head among the lambs, and each dappled  
and speckled-one among the goats—they shall be my  
wages.
- 33 And may my honesty plead for me on a future day:  
when you come-to-check my wages (that are) before you,  
whatever is not speckled or dappled among the goats, or  
dark among the lambs,  
it will be as though stolen by me.
- 34 Lavan said:

Good, let it be according to your words.

- 35 And on the same day he removed the streaked and dappled  
he-goats  
and every speckled and dappled she-goat, every one that  
had any white on it,  
and every dark-one among the lambs,  
and handed them over to his sons.
- 36 Then he put a three-days' journey between himself and  
Yaakov.
- Now Yaakov was tending Lavan's remaining flock.
- 37 Yaakov took himself rods from moist poplar, almond, and  
plane trees  
and peeled white peelings in them, exposing the white that  
was on the rods,
- 38 then he presented the rods that he had peeled in the  
gutters, in the water troughs where the flock would come  
to drink, in front of the flock.
- 

*Yaakov in Exile: Stealth and Prosperity* (30:25–32:1): The long account of how Yaakov outwits Lavan rounds out the portrait of his personality: he is a man at once clever, successful, and harassed. The text goes to great lengths to describe both men in behavior and thought, and we are given enough dialogue to be able to understand their motivations. The repeating words point to major themes: “serve,” “wages,” “face” (which will become central to the whole cycle by Chapter 32), and a whole vocabulary of trickery: “steal” (with the variations “be stealthy” and “steal the wits”), “take away” (see Chapter 27!), “snatch,” and “rob.”

- 26 **give over my wives and my children:** In the law of the region, slaves did not retain control of their families. Does this suggest something about Yaakov's treatment by Lavan? (Speiser)
- 27 **Pray, if I have found:** Or “May I now find.” **I have become wealthy, and YHWH . . .** : Some interpret this as “I have divined that YHWH . . .”
- 32 **Let me go:** Some read “Go.” **every speckled . . .** : This would appeal to Lavan, since such animals would be in the minority.
- 35 **white:** Heb. *lavan*. Also the word “poplar” in verse 37 is a play on Lavan (*livne*). The conniving father-in-law is tricked with words resembling his own name.

- Now they would be in heat as they came to drink;  
39 thus the flock came to be in heat by the rods,  
and the flock bore streaked, speckled, and dappled (young).  
40 But the sheep, Yaakov set apart,  
and gave position among the flock to each streaked-one and  
every dark-one among Lavan's flocks;  
thus he made special herds for himself, but did not make  
them for Lavan's flock.  
41 So it was that whenever the robust flock-animals were in  
heat,  
Yaakov would put the rods in sight of the flock-animals, in  
the gutters, to make them be in heat next to the rods.  
42 But when the flock-animals were feeble, he would not put  
them there.  
And so it was that the feeble-ones became Lavan's, and the  
robust-ones, Yaakov's.  
43 The man burst-forth-with-wealth exceedingly, yes,  
exceedingly, he came to have many flock-animals and  
maids and servants, and camels and he-asses.

31:1 Now he heard the words of Lavan's sons, (that they) said:  
Yaakov has taken away all that was our father's,  
and from what was our father's he has made all this  
weighty-wealth!

2 And Yaakov saw by Lavan's face:  
here, he was no longer with him as yesterday and the  
day-before.

3 And YHWH said to Yaakov:  
Return to the land of your fathers, to your kindred!  
I will be with you!

4 So Yaakov sent and had Rahel and Lea called to the field,  
to his animals,

5 and said to them:  
I see by your father's face:  
indeed, he is no longer toward me as yesterday and the  
day-before.

But the God of my father has been with me!

6 You yourselves know that I have served your father with all  
my might,

- 7 but your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times over,  
yet God has not allowed him to do me ill.
- 8 If he said thus: The speckled-ones shall be your wages,  
all the animals would bear speckled-ones,  
and if he said thus: The streaked-ones shall be your wages,  
all the animals would bear streaked-ones.
- 9 So God has snatched away your father's livestock and given them to me.
- 10 Now it was at the time of the animals' being in heat  
that I lifted up my eyes and saw in a dream:  
here, the he-goats that mount the animals—streaked,  
speckled, and spotted!
- 11 And God's messenger said to me in the dream: Yaakov!  
I said: Here I am.
- 12 He said:  
Pray lift up your eyes and see:  
All the he-goats that mount the animals—streaked,  
speckled, and spotted!  
For I have seen all that Lavan is doing to you.
- 

- 39 **by the rods:** Folk belief holds that what the animals see as they mate will influence the color of their offspring.
- 40 **gave position:** Following the interpretation of Fokkelman.
- 43 **he came to have many flock-animals:** Like his father (26:14) and grandfather (12:16).
- 31:2 **he was no longer with him:** Others use "Lavan's manner toward him was no longer . . ."
- 3 **land of your fathers . . . your kindred:** Here, unlike 12:1, the land is Canaan, not Harran! **I will be with you:** Heb. *ehye immakh*, interpreted here and throughout by B-R as "I will be-there with you," stressing that it is God's presence that is indicated by the verb *hyh*, "to be." See especially Ex. 3:14.
- 4 **to the field:** As a place where such conversations would be certain to be private.
- 7 **ten times:** Many times.
- 10 **Now it was . . . in a dream:** Several times in this chapter we hear of important events secondhand, in speech rather than in action. See note to 20:13. **streaked, speckled, and spotted:** Heb. *akuddim, nekuddim, u-ve-ruddim*. The rhyme (rare in biblical Hebrew) suggests a vision or a dream.

- 13 I am the God of Bet-El,  
where you anointed the pillar,  
where you vowed a vow to me.  
So now, arise,  
get out of this land,  
return to the land of your kindred!
- 14 Rahel and Lea answered him, they said to him:  
Do we still have a share, an inheritance in our father's  
house?
- 15 Is it not as strangers that we are thought of by him?  
For he has sold us and eaten up, yes, eaten up our  
purchase-price!
- 16 Indeed, all the riches that God has snatched away from our  
father—  
they belong to us and to our children.  
So now, whatever God has said to you, do!
- 17 So Yaakov arose, he lifted his children and his wives onto  
the camels
- 18 and led away all his livestock, all his property that he had  
gained,  
the acquired-livestock of his own acquiring which he had  
gained in the country of Aram,  
to come home to Yitzhak his father in the land of Canaan.
- 19 Now Lavan had gone to shear his flock;  
Rahel, meanwhile, stole the *terafim* that belonged to her  
father.
- 20 Now Yaakov stole the wits of Lavan the Aramean,  
by not telling him that he was about to flee.
- 21 And flee he did, he and all that was his;  
he arose and crossed the River, setting his face toward the  
mountain-country of Gil'ad.
- 22 Lavan was told on the third day that Yaakov had fled;  
23 he took his tribal-brothers with him and pursued him, a  
seven-days' journey,  
and caught up with him in the mountain-country of Gil'ad.
- 24 But God came to Lavan the Aramean in a dream of the  
night  
and said to him:

- Be on your watch  
lest you speak to Yaakov, be it good or ill!
- 25 When Lavan caught up with Yaakov,  
—Yaakov had pegged his tent in the mountains, and Lavan  
along with his brothers had pegged (his tent) in the  
mountain-country of Gil'ad—
- 26 Lavan said to Yaakov:  
What did you mean to do  
by stealing my wits and leading my daughters away like  
captives of the sword?
- 27 Why did you secretly flee and steal away on me, without  
even telling me,  
—for I would have sent you off with joy and with song,  
with drum and with lyre—
- 28 and you did not even allow me to kiss my grandchildren  
and my daughters?  
You have done foolishly now!
- 29 It lies in my hand's power to do (all of) you ill!  
But yesterday night the God of your father said to me,  
saying:  
Be on your watch  
from speaking to Yaakov, be it good or ill!
- 30 Well now, you had to go, yes, go, since you longed, longed  
for your father's house—  
Why did you steal my gods?
- 31 Yaakov answered and said to Lavan:  
Indeed, I was afraid, for I said to myself: Perhaps you will  
even rob me of your daughters!
- 

19 *terafim*: Hebrew obscure; apparently some sort of idols. Others use "household gods."

20 *stole the wits*: Fooled, hoodwinked.

24 *be it good or ill*: Lit. "from good to ill."

28 *kiss*: Upon leaving; "kiss good-bye."

30 *you had to go*: Or "Suppose you had to go."

31 *Indeed, I was afraid*: Yaakov seems to be explaining why he "had to go" first, and then answering Lavan's question in verse 32.

- 32 With whomever you find your gods—he shall not live;  
here in front of our brothers, (see if) you recognize anything  
of yours with me, and take it!  
Yaakov did not know that Rahel had stolen them.
- 33 Lavan came into Yaakov's tent and into Lea's tent and into  
the tents of the two maids, but he did not find anything.  
Then he went out of Lea's tent and came into Rahel's tent.
- 34 Now Rahel had taken the *terafim* and had put them in the  
basket-saddle of the camels, and had sat down upon them.  
Lavan felt all around the tent, but he did not find anything.
- 35 She said to her father:  
Do not let anger rage in my lord's eyes that I am not able to  
rise in your presence,  
for the manner of women is upon me.  
So he searched, but he did not find the *terafim*.
- 36 Now Yaakov became enraged and took up quarrel with  
Lavan,  
Yaakov answered, saying to Lavan:  
What is my offense, what is my sin,  
that you have dashed hotly after me,  
37 that you have felt all through my wares?  
What have you found from all your household-wares?  
Set it here in front of your brothers and my brothers,  
that they may decide between us two!
- 38 It is twenty years now that I have been under you:  
your ewes and your she-goats have never miscarried,  
the rams from your flock I never have eaten,  
39 none torn-by-beasts have I ever brought you—  
I would make good the loss,  
at my hand you would seek it,  
stolen by day or stolen by night.
- 40 (Thus) I was:  
by day, parching-heat consumed me, and cold by night,  
and my sleep eluded my eyes.
- 41 It is twenty years for me now in your house:  
I have served you fourteen years for your two daughters,  
and six years for your animals,  
yet you have changed my wages ten times over.
- 42 Had not the God of my father,

- the God of Avraham and the Terror of Yitzhak,  
 been-there for me,  
 indeed, you would have sent me off now, empty-handed!  
 But God has seen my being afflicted and the toil of my  
 hands,  
 and yesterday night he decided.
- 43 Lavan gave answer, he said to Yaakov:  
 The daughters are my daughters,  
 the children are my children,  
 the animals are my animals—  
 all that you see, it is mine!  
 But to my daughters—what can I do to them today, or to  
 their children whom they have borne?
- 44 So now, come,  
 let us cut a covenant, I and you,  
 and let (something here) serve as a witness between me and  
 you.
- 45 Yaakov took a stone and erected it as a standing-pillar.
- 46 And Yaakov said to his brothers:  
 Collect stones!  
 They fetched stones and made a mound.  
 And they ate there by the mound.
- 47 Now Lavan called it: *Yegar Sahaduta*,  
 while Yaakov called it: Gal-Ed.

---

32 **with me:** In my possession.

34 **sat down upon them:** Ridiculing the pagan gods, at least to the audience. **felt all around:** Recalling the “feeling” of Yitzhak in Chapter 27.

35 **manner of women:** The menstrual period.

37 **felt all through:** Or “rifled.”

39 **seek:** I.e., seek restitution.

41 **twenty years:** Yosef will be away from Yaakov for approximately the same period of time.

42 **Terror:** The intent of the Hebrew is unclear; it could be something like “Yitzhak’s champion” or “the One who inspired terror in Yitzhak.”

43 **to my daughters:** Others use “for my daughters.”

46 **And they ate:** See note to 26:30.

47 ***Yegar Sahaduta*:** Aramaic for “Mound-Witness” (Yaakov’s Gal-Ed of the next verse). Aramaic was the *lingua franca* of the area from the First Millennium B.C.E. on, and still exists in some forms today.

- 48 Lavan said:  
This mound is witness between me and you from today.  
Therefore they called its name: Gal-Ed/Mound-Witness,
- 49 and also: Mitzpa/Guardpost,  
because he said:  
May YHWH keep guard between me and you, when we are  
hidden from one another!
- 50 If you should ever afflict my daughters,  
if you should ever take wives besides my daughters . . . !  
No man is here with us,  
(but) see, God is witness between me and you!
- 51 And Lavan said to Yaakov:  
Here is this mound, here is the pillar that I have sunk  
between me and you:
- 52 witness is this mound, witness is the pillar  
that I will not cross over this mound to you  
and you will not cross over this mound and this pillar to  
me,  
for ill!
- 53 May the God of Avraham and the God of Nahor  
keep-justice between us—the God of their father.  
And Yaakov swore by the Terror of his father Yitzhak.
- 54 Then Yaakov slaughtered a slaughter-meal on the mountain  
and called his brothers to eat bread.  
They ate bread and spent the night on the mountain.
- 32:1 Lavan (arose) early in the morning, kissed his grandchildren  
and his daughters and blessed them,  
and Lavan went to return to his place.
- 2 As Yaakov went on his way,  
messengers of God encountered him.
- 3 Yaakov said when he saw them:  
This is a camp of God!  
And he called the name of that place:  
Mahanayim/Double-Camp.
- 4 Now Yaakov sent messengers on ahead of him to Esav his  
brother in the land of Še'ir, in the territory of Edom,

- 5 and charged them, saying:  
 Thus say to my lord, to Esav:  
 Thus says your servant Yaakov:  
 I have sojourned with Lavan and have tarried until now.
- 6 Ox and ass, sheep and servant and maid have become mine.  
 I have sent to tell my lord, to find favor in your eyes.
- 7 The messengers returned to Yaakov, saying:  
 We came to your brother, to Esav—  
 but he is already coming to meet you, and four hundred  
 men are with him!
- 8 Yaakov became exceedingly afraid and was distressed.  
 He divided the people that were with him and the sheep  
 and the oxen and the camels into two camps,
- 9 saying to himself:  
 Should Esav come against the one camp and strike it, the  
 camp that is left will escape.
- 

*Preparations for Esav* (32:2–24): As if to portend something momentous, Yaakov's first act upon setting out for home is an encounter with "messengers of God." From this starting point everything is subsequently a matter of "two camps" (v.8) or two levels: the divine and the human. This is the key to understanding the meeting between Yaakov and his brother in its entirety: Yaakov will have to deal with God before he can resolve his problem with Esav.

With an obsequiousness whose language reflects both the culture and the emotional setting, Yaakov prepares a gift for Esav, but finds to his dismay that his brother is "coming to meet him," with seemingly hostile intent. Once again stealth (or at least extreme caution) is the rule, with Yaakov taking elaborate precautions.

- 49 **when we are hidden**: Even when I cannot verify your behavior.
- 50 **God**: Or "a god."
- 54 **bread**: Or more generally, "food."
- 32:1 **Lavan (arose)** . . . : The verse numbering follows the Hebrew; some English translations number 32:1 as 31:55.
- 7 **four hundred men**: A considerable fighting force. Even if the number is schematic (as ten times forty), it still represents something formidable.

- 10 Then Yaakov said:  
God of my father Avraham,  
God of my father Yitzhak,  
O YHWH,  
who said to me: Return to your land, to your kindred, and  
I will deal well with you!—
- 11 Too small am I for all the faithfulness and trust that you  
have shown your servant.  
For with only my rod did I cross this Jordan, and now I  
have become two camps.
- 12 Pray save me from the hand of my brother, from the hand  
of Esav!  
For I am in fear of him,  
lest he come and strike me down, mothers and children  
alike!
- 13 But you, you have said:  
I will deal well, well with you,  
I will make your seed like the sand of the sea, which is too  
much to count!
- 14 Spending the night there that night,  
he took a gift from what was at hand, for Esav his brother:
- 15 she-goats, two hundred, and kids, twenty,  
ewes, two hundred, and rams, twenty,
- 16 nursing camels and their young, thirty,  
cows, forty, and bulls, ten,  
she-asses, twenty, and colts, ten;
- 17 he handed them over to his servants, herd by herd  
separately,  
and said to his servants:  
Cross on ahead of me, and leave room between herd and  
herd.
- 18 He charged the first group, saying:  
When Esav my brother meets you  
and asks you, saying: To whom do you belong, where are  
you going, and to whom do these ahead of you belong?
- 19 Then say:  
—to your servant, to Yaakov, it is a gift sent to my lord, to  
Esav,

- and here, he himself is also behind us.
- 20 Thus he charged the second, and thus the third, and thus all that were walking behind the herds, saying:  
According to this word shall you speak to Esav when you come upon him:
- 21 You shall say: Also—here, your servant Yaakov is behind us.
- For he said to himself:  
I will wipe (the anger from) his face  
with the gift that goes ahead of my face;  
afterward, when I see his face,  
perhaps he will lift up my face!
- 22 The gift crossed over ahead of his face,  
but he spent the night on that night in the camp.
- 23 He arose during that night,  
took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children  
to cross the Yabbok crossing.
- 24 He took them and brought them across the river; he  
brought across what belonged to him.
- 25 And Yaakov was left alone—  
Now a man wrestled with him until the dawn rose.
- 26 When he saw that he could not prevail against him,  
he touched the socket of his thigh;  
the socket of Yaakov's thigh had been dislocated as he  
wrestled with him.

- 
- 11 **Too small:** This is the first indication of the change in Yaakov's personality. Now he relies on God (although he still uses his wits, by diplomatically and strategically preparing for his meeting with Esav).
- 13 **you have said:** I.e., you have promised. See also note on 31:10. **like the sand:** In fact, this is God's promise to Avraham, in 22:17.
- 15: **she-goats . . . :** The gift is a special one, promising increase (females with their young).
- 21 **lift up my face:** Or "be gracious to me."
- 23 **Yabbok:** A traditional natural boundary, it creates a wild gorge which is the perfect setting for this incident.
- 25 **left alone:** In a psychological sense Yaakov has not yet crossed the river.
- 26 **touched:** Perhaps in homage, for the injury had already occurred (Ehrlich).

- 27 Then he said:  
Let me go,  
for the dawn has risen!  
But he said:  
I will not let you go  
unless you bless me.
- 28 He said to him:  
What is your name?  
And he said: Yaakov.
- 29 Then he said:  
Not as Yaakov/Heel-Sneak shall your name be henceforth  
uttered,  
but rather as Yisrael/God-Fighter,  
for you have fought with God and men  
and have prevailed.
- 30 Then Yaakov asked and said:  
Pray tell me your name!  
But he said:  
Now why do you ask after my name?  
And he gave him farewell-blessing there.
- 31 Yaakov called the name of the place: Peniel/Face of God,  
for: I have seen God,  
face to face,  
and my life has been saved.
- 32 The sun shone on him as he crossed by Penuel,  
and he was limping on his thigh.
- 33 —Therefore the Sons of Israel do not eat the sinew that is  
on the socket of the thigh until this day,  
for he had touched the socket of Yaakov's thigh at the  
sinew.
- 33:1 Yaakov lifted up his eyes and saw:  
there was Esav coming, and with him, four hundred men!  
He divided the children among Lea, Rahel, and the two  
maids:
- 2 he put the maids and their children first,  
Lea and her children behind them,  
and Rahel and Yosef behind them,

*The Mysterious Stranger: Struggle at the Yabbok* (32:25–33): Unexpectedly there is a break in the narrative. The stage has been set for something mysterious to happen with a nighttime backdrop and accented references to “crossing” (vv.23–24), which clearly refers to more than just the river.

The great wrestling scene at the Yabbok both symbolizes and resolves beforehand Yaakov’s meeting with Esav, much as Shakespeare’s pre-battle dream scenes (e.g., *Julius Caesar*, *Richard III*, *Macbeth*) will do with his characters. Struggle, the motif already introduced in the mother’s womb (Chapter 25), returns here, but that is not the only consideration. At issue is Yaakov’s whole life and personality, which despite his recent material successes are still under the pall of Esav’s curse (27:36). Central, then, is the change of name in verse 29, which suggests both a victorious struggle and the emergence of a new power. This is further supported by the Hebrew plays on sound: *Y’KB* (Yaakov), *YBK* (Yabbok), and *Y’BK* (wrestling).

The story may have originated as the well-known tale of a hero fighting a river divinity, but it clearly has been transformed into something much broader by its position and vocabulary.

*Resolution* (33:1–17): Once the Yabbok crisis is past, there is hope for reconciliation of the brothers. Even so, Yaakov exercises caution, behaving like a man who is presenting tribute to a king. The narrative is brought full circle in verses 10 and 11, where “face” is once again highlighted and where Yaakov’s gift is termed a “token-of-blessing.” At last the tension of Yaakov’s early life seems resolved.

27 **dawn has risen:** In folklore, supernatural beings often must disappear with the break of day.

28–29 **What is your name? . . . Not as Yaakov:** As if to say “You cannot be blessed with such a name!” The “man” in effect removes Esav’s curse.

29 **God-Fighter:** The name may actually mean “God fights.” Buber further conjectured that it means “God rules,” containing the kernel of ancient Israel’s concept of itself, but he retained “Fighter of God” in the translation. **God and men:** Others use “beings divine and human.”

30 **Now why do you ask:** In folklore the name of a divine being is often withheld, for to know it would be to acquire power over him. See also Judges 13:18: “Now why do you ask after my name? For it is wondrous!”

31 **Peniel/Face of God:** See verse 21, and 33:10, for the important allusions.

32 **The sun shone:** A sign of favor. **Penuel:** A variant spelling of Peniel.

33 **sinew:** The sciatic nerve.

- 3 while he himself advanced ahead of them.  
And he bowed low to the ground seven times, until he had  
come close to him, to his brother.
- 4 Esav ran to meet him,  
he embraced him, flung himself upon his neck, and kissed  
him.  
And they wept.
- 5 Then he lifted up his eyes and saw the women and the  
children, and said:  
What are these to you?  
He said:  
—the children with whom God has favored your servant.
- 6 Then the maids came close, they and their children, and  
bowed low.
- 7 Then Lea and her children came close and bowed low.  
Afterward Yosef and Rahel came close and bowed low.
- 8 He said:  
What to you is all this camp that I have met?  
He said:  
—to find favor in my lord's eyes.
- 9 Esav said:  
I have plenty, my brother, let what is yours remain yours.
- 10 Yaakov said:  
No, I pray!  
Pray, if I have found favor in your eyes,  
then take this gift from my hand.  
For I have, after all, seen your face, as one sees the face of  
God,  
and you have been gracious to me.
- 11 Pray take my token-of-blessing that is brought to you,  
for God has shown me favor—for I have everything.  
And he pressed him, so he took it.
- 12 Then he said:  
Let us travel on, and I will go on at your side.
- 13 But he said to him:  
My lord knows  
that the children are frail,  
and the sheep and the oxen are suckling in my care;  
if we were to push them for a single day, all the animals  
would die!

- 14 Pray let my lord cross on ahead of his servant,  
while as for me, I will travel slowly,  
at the pace of the gear ahead of me and at the pace of the  
children,  
until I come to my lord, in Se'ir.
- 15 Esav said:  
Pray let me leave with you some of the people who are  
mine.  
But he said:  
For what reason?  
May I only find favor in my lord's eyes!
- 16 So Esav started back that same day on his journey to Se'ir,  
17 while Yaakov traveled to Succot.  
He built himself a house there, and for his livestock he  
made sheds.  
Therefore they called the name of the place: Succot/Sheds.
- 18 Yaakov came home in peace to the city of Shekhem, which  
is in the land of Canaan,  
on his homecoming from the country of Aram,  
and he encamped facing the city.
- 

*Home: Peace and Violence* (33:18-34:31): "Yaakov came home in peace to the city of Shekhem" (33:18) continues the theme of resolution. Not only has Esav accepted his gift, but Yaakov has arrived home safely, in fulfillment of his prayer in 28:21. Like Avraham he purchases land; again like him he builds an altar.

Chapter 34, however, shatters the newly created atmosphere of security and peace ("peaceably disposed" in verse 21 is a bitter twist). Whereas Avraham and Yitzhak had been able to conclude treaties with the inhabitants of Canaan, Yaakov winds up in the opposite position. The text implies, as usual, that Canaanite sexual behavior is odious (v.7, "such [a thing] is not to be done!"), and this provides the spring for the

33:8 **What to you is:** I.e., What does it mean to you?

9 **my brother:** The phrase suggests that they are now reconciled.

15 **leave with you:** Or "station with you," "put at your disposal." **mine:** Lit. "with me." **For what reason?:** Yaakov still seems cautious.

- 19 And he acquired the piece of territory where he had spread  
out his tent, from the Sons of Hamor, Shekhem's father,  
for a hundred lambs'-worth.
- 20 There he set up a slaughter-site  
and called it:  
*El/God*, the God of Yisrael!

- 34:1 Now Dina, Lea's daughter, whom she had borne to  
Yaakov, went out to see the women of the land.
- 2 And Shekhem son of Hamor the Hivvite, the prince of the  
land, saw her:  
he took her and lay with her, forcing her.
- 3 But his emotions clung to Dina, Yaakov's daughter—he  
loved the girl,  
and he spoke to the heart of the girl.
- 4 So Shekhem said to Hamor his father, saying:  
Take me this girl as a wife!
- 5 Now Yaakov had heard that he had defiled Dina his  
daughter,  
but since his sons were with his livestock in the fields,  
Yaakov kept silent until they came home.
- 6 Hamor, Shekhem's father, went out to Yaakov, to speak  
with him.
- 7 But Yaakov's sons came back from the fields when they  
heard,  
and the men were pained, they were exceedingly enraged,  
for he had done a disgrace in Israel by lying with Yaakov's  
daughter,  
such (a thing) is not to be done!
- 8 Hamor spoke with them, saying:  
My son Shekhem—  
his emotions are so attached to your daughter,  
(so) pray give her to him as a wife!
- 9 And make marriage-alliances with us:  
give us your daughters, and our daughters take for  
yourselves,
- 10 and settle among us!  
The land shall be before you:  
settle down, travel about it, obtain holdings in it!

- 11 And Shekhem said to her father and to her brothers:  
 May I only find favor in your eyes!  
 However much you say to me, I will give-in-payment,  
 12 to whatever extreme you multiply the bride price and the  
 marriage gift,  
 I will give however much you say to me—  
 only give me the girl as a wife!  
 13 Now Yaakov's sons answered Shekhem and Hamor his  
 father with deceit,  
 speaking (thus) because he had defiled Dina their sister,  
 14 they said to them:  
 We cannot do this thing,  
 give our sister to a man who has a foreskin,  
 for that would be a reproach for us!
- 

action. Interestingly, Yaakov's sons act somewhat like their father had, "with deceit" (v.13); and love once again leads to an unfortunate end.

The vengefulness and brutality of Yaakov's sons in this story anticipates their later behavior in the Yosef story (Chapter 37); surprisingly, it is for the present crime and not the sale of Yosef that their father condemns them on his deathbed (49:5–7).

The chapter is notable for the latitude it allows its characters to express their thoughts and emotions: Shekhem's desire and love, the sons' anger and cunning, the Hivvites' gullibility and greed, and Yaakov's fear. Like other stories in the Yaakov cycle, it presents us with a somewhat ambiguous situation, where right and wrong are not always simple and the putative heroes are not always heroic.

- 19 **he acquired:** Like his grandfather Avraham, Yaakov must purchase the land. **lambs'-worth:** Hebrew obscure.
- 34:1 **to see:** To visit.
- 2 **Hamor:** Heb. "ass." Some take the name to prove that they were donkey-drivers, while others see it as an insult to the character.
- 7 **disgrace:** A different Hebrew word from the one rendered "disgraced" in 15:2.
- 8 **his emotions are so attached:** Speiser uses "has his heart set on." **pray give:** The repetition of "give" suggests a greediness on their part.
- 10 **travel about:** Or "trade."
- 13 **with deceit:** Another example of a key word in the Yaakov stories; see 27:35 and 29:25.

- 15 Only on this (condition) will we comply with you:  
if you become like us, by having every male among you  
circumcised.
- 16 Then we will give you our daughters, and your daughters  
we will take for ourselves,  
and we will settle among you, so that we become a single  
people.
- 17 But if you do not hearken to us, to be circumcised,  
we will take our daughter and go.
- 18 Their words seemed good in the eyes of Hamor and in the  
eyes of Shekhem son of Hamor,  
19 and the young man did not hesitate to do the thing,  
for he desired Yaakov's daughter.  
Now he carried more weight than anyone in his father's  
house.
- 20 When Hamor and Shekhem his son came back to the gate  
of their city,  
they spoke to the men of their city, saying:
- 21 These men are peaceably disposed toward us;  
let them settle in the land and travel about in it,  
for the land is certainly wide-reaching enough for them!  
Let us take their daughters as wives for ourselves, and let  
us give them our daughters.
- 22 But only on this condition will the men comply with us, to  
settle among us, to become a single people:  
that every male among us be circumcised, as they are  
circumcised.
- 23 Their acquired livestock, their acquired property and all  
their beasts—will they not then become ours?!
- Let us only comply with them, that they may settle among  
us!
- 24 So they hearkened to Hamor and to Shekhem his son, all  
who go out (to war) from the gate of his city:  
all the males were circumcised, all who go out (to war) from  
the gate of his city.
- 25 But on the third day it was, when they were still hurting,  
that two of Yaakov's sons, Shim'on and Levi, Dina's  
full-brothers, took each man his sword,

- they came upon the city (feeling) secure, and killed all the males,
- 26 and Hamor and Shekhem his son they killed by the sword. Then they took Dina from Shekhem's house and went off.
- 27 Yaakov's other sons came up upon the corpses and plundered the city, because they had defiled their sister.
- 28 Their sheep, their oxen, their asses—whatever was inside the city and out in the field, they took,
- 29 all their riches, all their little-ones and their wives they captured and plundered, as well as all that was in the houses.
- 30 But Yaakov said to Shim'on and to Levi: You have stirred-up-trouble for me, making me reek among the settled-folk of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites! For I have menfolk few in number; they will band together against me and strike me, and I will be destroyed, I and my household!
- 31 But they said: Should our sister then be treated like a whore?

35:1 Now God said to Yaakov:  
 Arise,  
 go up to Bet-El and stay there,  
 and construct a slaughter-site there  
 to the God/*El* who was seen by you when you fled from Esav your brother.

- 
- 19 **desired:** Not the same Hebrew term as in 2:9. **carried more weight:** I.e., was more respected.
- 21 **peaceably disposed:** Or “friendly,” “honest.”
- 24 **all who go out . . . :** I.e., all able-bodied men.
- 25 **Shim'on and Levi:** They are condemned for this incident by Yaakov in 49:5–7.
- 27 **Yaakov's other sons:** Lit. “Yaakov's sons.”

- 2 Yaakov said to his household and to all who were with him:  
Put away the foreign gods that are in your midst!  
Purify yourselves! Change your garments!
- 3 Let us arise and go up to Bet-El,  
there I will construct a slaughter-site  
to the God who answered me on the day of my distress  
—he was with me on the way that I went!
- 4 So they gave Yaakov all the foreign gods that were in their  
hand, along with the sacred-rings that were in their ears,  
and Yaakov concealed them under the oak/*ela* that is near  
Shekhem.
- 5 Then they departed.  
Now a dread from God lay upon the towns that were  
around them,  
so that they did not pursue Yaakov's sons.
- 6 So Yaakov came home to Luz, which is in the land of  
Canaan—that is now Bet-El—he and all the people that  
were with him.
- 7 There he built a slaughter-site  
and called the place:  
Godhead/*El* of Bet-El!  
For there had the power-of-God been revealed to him, when  
he fled from his brother.
- 8 Now Devora, Rivka's nurse, died.  
She was buried below Bet-El, beneath the oak;  
they called its name: Allon Bakhut/Oak of Weeping.
- 9 God was seen by Yaakov again, when he came home from  
the country of Aram,  
and he gave him blessing:
- 10 God said to him:  
Yaakov is your name,  
Yaakov shall your name be called no more,  
for your name shall be Yisrael!  
And he called his name: Yisrael!
- 11 God said further to him:  
I am God Shaddai.  
Bear fruit and be many!

Nation, yes, a host of nations shall come from you,  
kings shall go out from your loins!

- 12 The land  
that I gave to Avraham and to Yitzhak,  
to you I give it,  
and to your seed after you I give the land.
- 13 God went up from beside him, at the place where he had  
spoken with him.
- 14 And Yaakov set up a standing-pillar at the place where he  
had spoken with him, a pillar of stone,  
he poured out a poured-offering on it and cast oil upon it.
- 15 And Yaakov called the name of the place where God had  
spoken with him:  
Bet-El/House of God!
- 

*Home: Blessing and Death (35):* Several brief notices round out Yaakov's return to Canaan. First (vv.1-7) there is the return to Bet-El, where he builds an altar and has the "foreign" gods of his household people put away—thus fulfilling his promise in Chapter 28. This passage is built upon the Hebrew word *El*, God (related actually to an earlier Northwest Semitic name for a god).

Apparently a second version of Yaakov's name change is recorded in verses 9-15. As in the case of Avraham, seed and land are promised by God. The land can be given to him and "to your seed after you" only upon his return.

Finally, spread out through the chapter are the accounts of three deaths: Devora, Rivka's nurse (v.8—a veiled reference to Rivka's own death?), Rahel (vv.16-20), and finally Yitzhak (vv.28-29). Yaakov's youth is over, with the dramatic break with those close to him in that period.

35:2 **Change your garments:** Speiser translates this as "Put on new clothes."

8 **Rivka's nurse, died:** See note to 24:59.

9ff. **God was seen . . . :** Apparently a different version of the Peniel story of Chapter 32.

11-12 **I am God Shaddai . . . :** See God's words to Avraham in 17:6.

13 **at the place where he had spoken with him:** The phrase occurs three times here and subsequently, probably to emphasize the sanctity of Bet-El.

- 16 They departed from Bet-El.  
But when there was still a stretch of land to come to Efrat,  
Rahel began to give birth,  
and she had a very hard birthing.
- 17 It was, when her birthing was at its hardest,  
that the midwife said to her:  
Do not be afraid,  
for this one too is a son for you!
- 18 It was, as her life was slipping away  
—for she was dying—  
that she called his name: Ben-Oni/Son-of-My-Woe.  
But his father called him: Binyamin/Son-of-the-Right-Hand.
- 19 So Rahel died;  
she was buried along the way to Efrat—that is now  
Bet-Lehem.
- 20 Yaakov set up a standing-pillar over her burial-place,  
that is Rahel's burial pillar of today.
- 21 Now Yisrael departed and spread his tent beyond  
Migdal-Eder/Herd-Tower.
- 22 And it was when Yisrael was dwelling in that land: Re'uven  
went and lay with Bilha, his father's concubine.  
And Yisrael heard—
- Now the sons of Yaakov were twelve:
- 23 The sons of Lea: Yaakov's firstborn, Re'uven; Shim'on,  
Levi and Yehuda, Yissakhar and Zevulun.
- 24 The sons of Rahel: Yosef and Binyamin.
- 25 The sons of Bilha, Rahel's maid: Dan and Naftali.
- 26 The sons of Zilpa, Lea's maid: Gad and Asher.  
These (were) Yaakov's sons, who were born to him in the  
country of Aram.
- 27 Yaakov came home to Yitzhak his father at Mamre, in the  
town of Arba—that is now Hevron,  
where Avraham and Yitzhak had sojourned.
- 28 And the days of Yitzhak were a hundred years and eighty
- 29 years,/ then Yitzhak breathed-his-last.

He died and was gathered to his kinspeople, old and abundant in days.

Esav and Yaakov his sons buried him.

36:1 And these are the begettings of Esav—that is Edom.

2 Esav took his wives from the women of Canaan:

Ada, daughter of Elon the Hittite, and Oholivama, daughter

3 of Ana (and) granddaughter of Tziv'on the Hivvite,/ and Ba'semat, daughter of Yishmael and sister of Nevayot.

4 Ada bore Elifaz to Esav,

Ba'semat bore Re'uel,

5 Oholivama bore Ye'ush, Ya'lam, and Korah.

These are Esav's sons, who were born to him in the land of Canaan.

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*Re'uven* (35:21–22): The following tiny fragment, concerning Re'uven's usurping his father's concubine, serves to presage his fall as firstborn later on. Such an act had symbolic value in biblical society; Avshalom (Absalom) sleeps with David's concubines as a sign of rebellion and a desire to attain the crown (II Sam. 16:21–22).

*Esav's Descendants* (36): The complicated genealogies and dynasties of this chapter close out the first part of the Yaakov cycle, strictly speaking. Fitting in the context of a society which lay great store by kinship and thus by careful remembering of family names, it may also indicate the greatness of Yitzhak's line, as Chapter 25 had earlier done for Avraham. Certainly the lists give evidence of a time when the Edomites were more than merely Israel's neighbors, assuming great importance in historical recollection (Speiser).

17 **this one too is a son:** This seems to be a breach birth, since the midwife already knew that it was a son when "her birthing was at its hardest"—that is, before the child had fully emerged.

18 **her life was slipping away:** Or "her life-breath was leaving (her)," paralleling a similar expression in Ugaritic. **But his father called him: Binyamin:** Given the power of names, it would not have been considered fortuitous for a child to begin life with a name such as the one Rahel gives him. **Binyamin:** Trad. English "Benjamin."

19 **Bet-Lehem:** Trad. English "Bethlehem."

29 **Then Yitzhak breathed-his-last:** See the Commentary on 26:1–6.

- 6 Esav took his wives, his sons and his daughters, and all the persons in his household,  
as well as his acquired livestock, all his beasts, and all his acquisitions that he had gained in the land of Canaan,  
and went to (another) land, away from Yaakov his brother;  
7 for their property was too much for them to settle together,  
the land of their sojourning could not support them, on account of their acquired livestock.
- 8 So Esav settled in the mountain-country of Se'ir—Esav, that is Edom.
- 9 And these are the begettings of Esav, the tribal-father of Edom, in the mountain-country of Se'ir:
- 10 These are the names of the sons of Esav:  
Elifaz son of Ada, Esav's wife, Re'uel, son of Ba'semat, Esav's wife.
- 11 The sons of Elifaz were Teman, Omar, Tzefo, Ga'tam, and Kenaz.
- 12 Now Timna was concubine to Elifaz son of Esav, and she bore Amalek to Elifaz.  
These are the sons of Ada, Esav's wife.
- 13 And these are the sons of Re'uel: Nahat and Zerah, Shamma and Mizza.  
These were the sons of Ba'semat, Esav's wife.
- 14 And these were the sons of Oholivama, daughter of Ana, (and) granddaughter of Tziv'on (and) Esav's wife:  
She bore Ye'ush and Ya'lam and Korah to Esav.
- 15 These are the families of Esav's sons:  
From the sons of Elifaz, Esav's firstborn, are: the Family Teman, the Family Omar, the Family Tzefo, the Family  
16 Kenaz,/ the Family Korah, the Family Ga'tam, the Family Amalek;  
these are the families from Elifaz in the land of Edom, these are the sons of Ada.
- 17 And these are the Sons of Re'uel, Esav's son: the Family Nahat, the Family Zerah, the Family Shamma, the Family Mizza;  
these are the families from Re'uel in the land of Edom, these the Sons of Ba'semat, Esav's wife.

- 18 And these are the Sons of Oholivama, Esav's wife: the Family Ye'ush, the Family Ya'lam, the Family Korah; these are the families from Oholivama, daughter of Ana, Esav's wife.
- 19 These are the Sons of Esav and these are their families.—That is Edom.
- 20 These are the sons of Se'ir the Horite, the settled-folk of the land:
- 21 Lotan and Shoval and Tziv'on and Ana and Dishon and Etzer and Dishan.  
These are the Horite families, the Sons of Se'ir in the land of Edom.
- 22 The sons of Lotan were Hori and Hemam, and Lotan's sister was Timna.
- 23 And these are the sons of Shoval: Alvan and Manahat and Eval, Shefo and Onam.
- 24 And these are the sons of Tziv'on: Ayya and Ana.  
—That is the Ana who found the *yemim* in the wilderness, as he was tending the asses of Tziv'on his father.
- 25 And these are the sons of Ana: Dishon—and Oholivama was Ana's daughter.
- 26 And these are the sons of Dishon: Hemdan and Eshban and Yitran and Ceran.
- 27 These are the sons of Etzer: Bilhan and Zaavan and Akan.
- 28 These are the sons of Dishan: Utz and Aran.
- 29 These are the Horite families: the Family Lotan, the Family
- 30 Shoval, the Family Tziv'on, the Family Ana,/ the Family Dishon, the Family Etzer, the Family Dishan.

36:7 **for their property was too much:** Again recalling Avraham, in his conflict with Lot (13:6).

14 **Tziv'on:** The name means "hyena." Such animal names have long been popular in the region and occur a number of times in this chapter (Vawter).

15 **families:** Others use "chieftains."

24 **yemim:** Hebrew obscure; some use "hot-springs," "lakes."

26 **Dishon:** The traditional text uses "Dishan," but see I Chron. 1:41.

These are the families of the Horites, according to their families in the land of Se'ir.

- 31 Now these are the kings who served as king in the land of Edom, before any king of the Sons of Israel served as king:
- 32 In Edom, Bela son of Be'or was king; the name of his city was Dinhava.
- 33 When Bela died, Yovav son of Zerah of Botzra became king in his stead.
- 34 When Yovav died, Husham from the land of the Temanites became king in his stead.
- 35 When Husham died, Hadad son of Bedad became king in his stead—who struck Midyan in the territory of Mo'av, and the name of his city was Avit.
- 36 When Hadad died, Samla of Masreka became king in his stead.
- 37 When Samla died, Sha'ul of Rehovot-by-the-River became king in his stead.
- 38 When Sha'ul died, Baal-Hanan son of Akhbor became king in his stead.
- 39 When Baal-Hanan son of Akhbor died, Hadar became king in his stead; the name of his city was Pa'u, and the name of his wife, Mehetavel daughter of Matred, daughter of Me-Zahav.
- 40 Now these are the names of the families from Esav, according to their clans, according to their local-places, by their names:
- 41 The Family Timna, the Family Alvan, the Family Yetet,/ the Family Oholivama, the Family Ela, the Family
- 42 Pinon,/ the Family Kenaz, the Family Teman, the Family
- 43 Mivtzar,/ the Family Magdiel, the Family Iram.
- These are the families of Edom according to their settlements in the land of their holdings.

That is Esav, the tribal-father of Edom.

# PART IV Yosef

## (37–50)

**T**HE STORIES about the last Patriarch form a coherent whole, leading some to dub it a “novella.” It stands well on its own, although it has been consciously and artfully woven together into both the Yaakov cycle and the entire book.

Initially the tale is one of family emotions, and it is in fact extreme emotions which give it a distinctive flavor. All the major characters are painfully expressive of their feelings, from the doting father to the spoiled son, from the malicious brothers to the lustful wife of Potifar, from the nostalgic adult Yosef to the grief-stricken old Yaakov. It is only through the subconscious medium of dreams, in three sets, that we are made to realize that a higher plan is at work which will supersede the destructive force of these emotions.

For this is a story of how “ill”—with all its connotations of fate, evil, and disaster—is changed to good. Despite the constant threat of death to Yosef, to the Egyptians, and to Binyamin, the hidden, optimistic thrust of the story is “life,” a word that appears in various guises throughout. Even “face,” the key word of the Yaakov cycle which often meant something negative, is here given a kinder meaning, as the resolution to Yaakov’s life.

A major subtheme of the plot is the struggle for power between Re’uven and Yehuda. Its resolution has implications that are as much tribal as personal, for the tribe of Yehuda later became the historical force in ancient Israel as the seat of the monarchy.

Although many details of the narrative confirm Egyptian practices, those practices actually reflect an Egypt considerably later than the period of the Patriarchs (Redford). Of interest also is the prominence of the number five in the story, a detail that is unexplained but that gives some unity to the various sections of text.

In many ways the Yosef material repeats elements in the Yaakov traditions. A long list could be compiled, but let us at least mention here

sibling hatred, exile of the hero, foreign names, love and hate, dreams, and deception—even so detailed as to duplicate the use of a goat-kid. But its focusing on a classic rags-to-riches plot, with the addition of a moralistic theme, make the Yosef story a distinctive and always popular tale, accessible in a way that the more difficult stories of the first three parts of Genesis are not.

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37:1 Yaakov settled in the land of his father's sojournings,  
in the land of Canaan.

2 These are the begettings of Yaakov.

Yosef, seventeen years old, used to tend the sheep along with  
his brothers,  
for he was serving-lad with the sons of Bilha and the sons of  
Zilpa, his father's wives.  
And Yosef brought a report of them, an ill one, to their  
father.

3 Now Yisrael loved Yosef above all his sons,  
for he was a son of old age to him,  
so he made him an ornamented coat.

4 When his brothers saw that it was he whom their father  
loved above all his brothers,  
they hated him,  
and could not speak to him in peace.

5 Now Yosef dreamt a dream, and told it to his brothers  
—from then on they hated him still more—,

6 he said to them:

Pray hear this dream that I have dreamt:

7 Here,

we were binding sheaf-bundles out in the field,  
and here, my sheaf arose, it was standing upright,  
and here, your sheaves were circling round and bowing  
down to my sheaf!

- 8 His brothers said to him:  
 Would you be king, yes, king over us?  
 Or would you really rule, yes, rule us?  
 From then on they hated him still more—for his dreams,  
 for his words.
- 

*Young Yosef: Love and Hate (37):* As has been the pattern with the Avraham and Yaakov cycles, the opening chapter here introduces the key themes of the entire story. These include the father's love, the power of words, dreams, "ill" as a key word (here denoting evil intent but eventually encompassing misfortune, among other concepts), and of course, the brothers' hatred, which at first glance is the motivating force behind the action.

But the initial blame for what happens clearly lies with the father (vv.3-4), and is made unbearable by Yosef's own behavior. In point of fact he is largely responsible for his own downfall, bearing tales about his brothers (v.2) even before Yaakov's preference for him is noted. His insistence on telling his dreams to his brothers must be galling, particularly the second time (v.9), coming as it does after the report that "they hated him still more for his dreams" (v.8).

- 37:2 **begettings:** In the sense of "family history." As noted above, the Yosef story is a continuation of the Yaakov saga. **seventeen:** Together with 47:28, this provides another example of numerical balance in these stories (see the Commentary on "The Patriarchal Narratives, p. 45). Yosef lives with Yaakov for the first seventeen years of his life and for the last seventeen of his father's. **along with his brothers:** A hint that he would one day "shepherd" (rule) his brothers? The Hebrew is open to that interpretation (Redford). **brought a report:** Or "gossip." Although the doting father's love is crucial, it seems really to be Yosef's own behavior (which precedes the information about his coat) that causes his abuse by the brothers.
- 3 **ornamented:** Hebrew obscure; B-R uses "ankle-length."
- 4 **hated:** Such a violent emotion nevertheless has once before (with Lea in 29:31) led not to disaster but to the fulfillment of the divine plan (there, the hatred results in the competition to have children). **in peace:** Or "civilly"—again the key Yaakov word, "peace."
- 6 **hear:** Which can also mean "understand" in biblical Hebrew.
- 8 **king, yes, king . . . rule, yes, rule:** The doubling might reflect the brothers' astonishment and bitterness. See also verse 10.

- 9 But he dreamt still another dream, and recounted it to his brothers,  
he said:  
Here, I have dreamt still (another) dream:  
Here,  
the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me!
- 10 When he recounted it to his father and his brothers,  
his father rebuked him and said to him:  
What kind of dream is this that you have dreamt!  
Shall we come, yes, come, I, your mother and your brothers,  
to bow down to you to the ground?
- 11 His brothers envied him,  
while his father remembered the matter.
- 12 Now his brothers went to tend their father's sheep in Shekhem.
- 13 Yisrael said to Yosef:  
Are not your brothers tending sheep in Shekhem?  
Come, I will send you to them!  
He said to him:  
Here I am.
- 14 And he said to him:  
Come, pray, look into the well-being of your brothers and into the well-being of the sheep,  
and bring me back word.  
So he sent him out from the valley of Hevron, and he came to Shekhem.
- 15 And a man came upon him—here, he was roaming in the field;  
the man asked him, saying:  
What do you seek?
- 16 He said:  
I seek my brothers,  
pray tell me where they are tending-sheep.
- 17 The man said:  
They have moved on from here,  
indeed, I heard them say: Let us go to Dotan.

- Yosef went after his brothers and came upon them in Dotan.
- 18 They saw him from afar,  
and before he had gotten near them, they plotted-cunningly  
against him to cause his death.
- 19 They said each man to his brother:  
Here comes that dreamer!
- 20 So now, come, let us kill him and cast him into one of these  
pits  
and say: An ill-tempered beast has devoured him!  
Then we will see what becomes of his dreams!
- 21 When Re'uven heard it he tried to rescue him from their  
hand, he said:  
Let us not take his life!
- 22 And Re'uven said to them:  
Do not shed blood!  
Cast him into this pit that is in the wilderness,  
but do not lay a hand upon him!  
—in order that he might save him from their hand, to  
return him to his father.
- 

The key word of the chapter, not surprisingly, is “brother,” culminating in Yehuda’s ironic words (v.27): “let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother. . . .” Shortly afterward Yosef, their “(own) flesh,” is sold into slavery and probable death.

- 10 **your mother:** The fact that she had died in Chapter 35 does not detract from the symbol of the dream.
- 11 **remembered:** Or “kept in mind.”
- 12 **Shekhem:** In our text this city’s name (three times here) reminds the reader of the disastrous events of Chapter 34.
- 13 **Come:** Repeated in verses 20 and 27; it is ironically Yaakov’s decision to send Yosef to his brothers that sets this part of the plot into action.
- 14 **well-being:** Heb. *shalom*, translated as “peace” in verse 4 and elsewhere.
- 15 **a man:** Possibly another divine messenger (like the “man” in 32:25). See also the note to “roaming” in 20:13.
- 21 **take his life:** Lit. “strike him mortally.”

- 23 So it was, when Yosef came to his brothers,  
that they stripped Yosef of his coat,  
the ornamented coat that he had on,  
24 and took him and cast him into the pit.  
Now the pit was empty—no water in it.  
25 And they sat down to eat bread.

They lifted up their eyes and saw:  
there was a caravan of Yishmaelites coming from Gil'ad,  
their camels carrying balm, balsam, and ladanum,  
traveling to take them down to Egypt.

- 26 Now Yehuda said to his brothers:  
What gain is there  
if we kill our brother and cover up his blood?  
27 Come, let us sell him to the Yishmaelites—  
but let not our hand be upon him,  
for he is our brother, our flesh!  
And his brothers listened to him.

- 28 Meanwhile, some Midyanite men, merchants, passed by;  
they hauled up Yosef from the pit  
and sold Yosef to the Yishmaelites, for twenty pieces of  
silver.

They brought Yosef to Egypt.

- 29 When Re'uven returned to the pit:  
here, Yosef was no more in the pit!  
He rent his garments  
30 and returned to his brothers and said:  
The child is no more!  
And I—where am I to go?

- 31 But they took Yosef's coat,  
they slew a goat buck  
and dipped the coat in the blood.  
32 They had the ornamented coat sent out  
and had it brought to their father and said:  
We found this;  
pray recognize

- whether it is your son's coat or not!
- 33 He recognized it  
and said:  
My son's coat!  
An ill-tempered beast has devoured him!  
Yosef is torn, torn-to-pieces!
- 34 Yaakov rent his clothes,  
he put sackcloth on his loins  
and mourned his son for many days.
- 35 All his sons and daughters arose to comfort him,  
but he refused to be comforted.  
He said:  
No,  
I will go down to my son  
in mourning, to Sheol!  
Thus his father wept for him.
- 36 Meanwhile, the Midyanites had sold him into Egypt  
to Potifar, Pharaoh's court-official,  
Chief of the (palace) Guard.
- 

25 **bread:** Or "food."

29 **rent his garments:** The tearing of clothing was a customary sign of mourning.

30 **And I . . . :** Heb. *va-ani, ana ani va*. The sound expresses the emotions. **Where am I to go:** I.e., what will become of me?

32 **pray recognize:** See 27:23, where Yitzhak did not "recognize" Yaakov. Yaakov's youth returns to haunt him, in a sense.

33 **My son's coat:** With the omission of "It is," the shock is conveyed more dramatically. Some ancient versions, however, include the phrase. **An ill-tempered beast . . . torn-to-pieces:** The Hebrew breaks into verse structure, with three word-beats per line: *haya ra'a akhalat'hu/ tarof toraf Yosef* (Alter).

34 **many days:** Possibly "years"; at any rate, longer than a normal mourning period (in the Bible, thirty or seventy days) (Jacob).

35 **Sheol:** The biblical underworld; others (and B-R) use "the grave."

36 **Midyanites:** The Hebrew has "Medanites." **court-official:** Lit. "eunuch," a common ancient Near Eastern title for such a position. Originally the term was applied literally, although later on the person was not necessarily a eunuch.

- 38:1 Now it was at about that time  
that Yehuda went down, away from his brothers  
and turned aside to an Adullamite man—his name was  
Hira.
- 2 There Yehuda saw the daughter of a Canaanite man—his  
name was Shua,  
he took her (as his wife) and came in to her.
- 3 She became pregnant and bore a son, and he called his  
name: Er.
- 4 She became pregnant again and bore a son, and she called  
his name: Onan.
- 5 Once again she bore a son, and she called his name: Shela.  
Now he was in Ceziv when she bore him.
- 6 Yehuda took a wife for Er, his firstborn—her name was  
Tamar.
- 7 But Er, Yehuda's firstborn, was ill in the eyes of YHWH,  
and YHWH caused him to die.
- 8 Yehuda said to Onan:  
Come in to your brother's wife, do a brother-in-law's duty  
by her,  
to preserve seed for your brother!
- 9 But Onan knew that the seed would not be his,  
so it was, whenever he came in to his brother's wife, he let  
it go to ruin on the ground,  
so as not to provide seed for his brother.
- 10 What he did was ill in the eyes of YHWH,  
and he caused him to die as well.
- 11 Now Yehuda said to Tamar his daughter-in-law:  
Sit as a widow in your father's house  
until Shela my son has grown up.  
For he said to himself:  
Otherwise he will die as well, like his brothers!  
So Tamar went and stayed in her father's house.
- 12 And many days passed.

Now Shua's daughter, Yehuda's wife, died.  
When Yehuda had been comforted,  
he went up to his sheep-shearers, he and his friend Hira the  
Adullamite, to Timna.

*Yehuda and Tamar* (38): Chapter 38 has been the subject of many discussions, for it seems to be out of place. It interrupts the story of Yosef at a crucial dramatic spot, and is not chronologically fully consistent with it (Yehuda ages considerably; then we return to Yosef as a seventeen-year-old). Some feel that the suspension in the drama helps to raise tension; others argue that this is the only possible place to put an important tradition about the important brother. While these and other arguments may have their merit, one may discern some significant thematic connections as well, both within the context of the Yosef story and of Genesis as a whole.

The episode first of all demonstrates the growth of Yehuda as a character who is central to the Yosef novella. Already in Chapter 37 he had demonstrated active leadership, albeit in a questionable cause. There he actually saved Yosef's life, in contrast to Re'uven's unsuccessful and ultimately self-centered rescue attempt. As the one who basically assumes responsibility, he will be made to undergo an inner development in the narrative, and again becomes the one to take charge of the youngest son (Binyamin, in Chapters 43 and 44). The missing piece that begins to explain his nobility in this regard (Chapter 44) is the present chapter. Yehuda here learns what it is to lose sons, and to want desperately to protect his youngest. Although his failure to marry off Tamar to the youngest son leads to public humiliation (twice, actually), his response shows that he immediately accepts blame: "She is in-the-right more than I" (v.26). Such an interpretation is further confirmed by the restriction

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38:1 **away from his brothers:** More than geography seems to be meant. Yehuda begins to change as a person here, in preparation for Chapter 44. Note that the place Adullam assonates with Arabic (*'adula*) "to turn aside."

5 **Ceziv:** The Hebrew root connotes "lying."

6 **Tamar:** The name means "palm tree."

6–7 **firstborn:** Perhaps parallel to the ineffectual firstborn, Re'uven, of the previous chapter.

7 **was ill:** I.e., he was evil, although we are not told specifically how.

8 **a brother-in-law's duty:** It was a well-known practice in biblical times that if a man died without leaving an heir, it was the obligation of his nearest of kin (usually his brother) to marry the widow and sire a son—who would then bear the name of the deceased man (Deut. 25:5–10).

10 **What he did was ill:** Onan dies because he does not fulfill his legal obligation to continue his brother's line. The later interpretation, that his crime was masturbation ("onanism"), has no basis in this text.

11 **Otherwise he will die:** Folk belief often regarded a woman who had outlived two husbands as a bad risk in marriage. The emotion here—a father's fear of losing a young son—will return as central in 42:36.

- 13 Tamar was told, saying:  
Here, your father-in-law is going up to Timna to shear his sheep.
- 14 She removed her widow's garments from her,  
covered herself with a veil and wrapped herself,  
and sat down by the entrance to Enayim/Two-Wells, which  
is on the way to Timna,  
for she saw that Shela had grown up, yet she had not been  
given to him as a wife.
- 15 When Yehuda saw her, he took her for a whore, for she had  
covered her face.
- 16 So he turned aside to her by the wayside and said:  
Come-now, pray let me come in to you—  
for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law.  
She said:  
What will you give me for coming in to me?
- 17 He said:  
I myself will send out a goat kid from the flock.  
She said:  
Only if you give me a pledge, until you send it.
- 18 He said:  
What is the pledge that I am to give you?  
She said:  
Your seal, your cord, and your staff that is in your hand.  
He gave them to her and then he came in to her—and she  
became pregnant by him.
- 19 She arose and went away,  
then she put off her veil from her and clothed herself in her  
widow's garments.
- 20 Now when Yehuda sent the goat kid by the hand of his  
friend the Adullamite, to fetch the pledge from the  
woman's hand,  
he could not find her.
- 21 He asked the people of her place, saying:  
Where is that sacred-prostitute, the one in Two-Wells by  
the wayside?  
They said:  
There has been no sacred-prostitute here!
- 22 So he returned to Yehuda and said:

I could not find her; moreover, the people of the place said:  
There has been no sacred-prostitute here!

23 Yehuda said:

Let her keep them for herself, lest we become a  
laughing-stock.

Here, I sent her this kid, but you, you could not find her.

of the word “pledge” to here and 43:9. Yehuda has learned what it means to stake oneself for a principle.

Only after we have been informed of Yehuda’s change can the narrative resume with Chapter 39. True to biblical thinking, redemption may start only after the crime has been punished (e.g., the Samson story, where the hero’s hair begins to grow immediately after his imprisonment).

Actually the chronology works out quite well. We are told via 41:46, 53–54, that about twenty years elapse between the sale of Yosef and his meetings with the brothers in Egypt; this often signifies a period in biblical parlance and could encompass a generation or a bit less. Since Yehuda was quite possibly a father already in Chapter 37, the present story could well end just before the events reported in Chapter 43—in other words, Yehuda reaches full inner maturity just in time.

The other function of this story seems to be to carry out the major theme of Genesis as we have presented it: continuity and discontinuity between the generations. What is at stake here is not merely the line of one of the brothers, but the line which (as the biblical audience must have been fully aware) will lead to royalty—King David was a descendant of Peretz of verse 29. This should not be surprising in a book of origins; we noted the possible mention of Jerusalem in 14:18. Apparently a popular early theme, connected as we have noted to the power of God in history, continuity/discontinuity is repeated in somewhat similar circumstances in the book of Ruth (which contains the only other mention of “begettings” outside of Genesis and Num.3:1).

The narrator has woven Chapters 38 and 37 together with great skill. Again a man is asked to “recognize” objects, again the use of a kid, and again a brother (this time a dead one) is betrayed.

18 **seal . . . cord . . . staff**: Individual objects of identification in the ancient Near East, particularly the seal, which served to sign documents. See Speiser.

21 **sacred-prostitute**: Or “cult prostitute,” one attached to a shrine in Canaan. Sex in the ancient world was often linked to religion (as part of fertility rites), although the Hebrews sought to sever the tie.

- 24 Now it was, after almost three New-Moons  
that Yehuda was told, saying:  
Tamar your daughter-in-law has played-the-whore,  
in fact, she has become pregnant from whoring!  
Yehuda said:  
Bring her out and let her be burned!
- 25 (But) as she was being brought out,  
she sent a message to her father-in-law, saying:  
By the man to whom these belong I am pregnant.  
And she said:  
Pray recognize—  
whose seal and cords and staff are these?
- 26 Yehuda recognized them  
and said:  
She is in-the-right more than I!  
For after all, I did not give her to Shela my son!  
And he did not know her again.
- 27 Now it was, at the time of her birthing, that here: twins  
were in her body!
- 28 And it was, as she was giving birth, that (one of them) put  
out a hand;  
the midwife took and tied a crimson thread on his hand,  
saying:  
This one came out first.
- 29 But it was, as he pulled back his hand, here, his brother  
came out!  
So she said:  
What a breach you have breached for yourself!  
So they called his name: Peretz/Breach.
- 30 Afterward his brother came out, on whose hand was the  
crimson thread.  
They called his name: Zerah.
- 39:1 Now when Yosef was brought down to Egypt,  
Potifar, an official of Pharaoh, and Chief of the Guard, an  
Egyptian man, acquired him from the hand of the  
Yishmaelites who brought him down there.

- 2 But YHWH was with Yosef, so that he became a man of success:  
 while he was in the house of his lord the Egyptian,  
 3 his lord saw that YHWH was with him,  
 so that whatever he did, YHWH made succeed in his hands.  
 4 Yosef found favor in his eyes, and he waited upon him;  
 he appointed him over his house, and everything belonging to him he placed in his hands.  
 5 And it was, from when he had appointed him over his house and over everything that belonged to him,  
 that YHWH blessed the Egyptian's house because of Yosef;  
 YHWH's blessing was upon everything that belonged to him, in the house and in the fields.
- 

*Yosef: Rise and Fall (39):* This chapter prefigures Yosef's eventual rise to power and simultaneously chronicles his lowest point, literally and figuratively. The two strands of the plot are woven together into a pattern of success/authority → imprisonment → success/authority. This also mirrors the larger story, which progresses from favorite son → slavery → viceroy of Egypt. The integration takes place partly through the medium of a key word, "hand"—which also occurred four times at the end of Chapter 38 and thus acts as a further textual connector. Yosef's success is tied six times to the phrase "in his hands" (vv.3, 4, 6, 8, 22, 23); he is thrown into prison because of the garments that he left in his mistress's "hands" (vv.12, 13). Similarly, the movement of the chapter is mirrored in the word "eyes," which is linked first to the theme of authority (v.4),

- 27ff. **Now it was . . .** : The scene here rather strikingly recalls Yaakov and Esav at birth: twins, the hand reaching out, and the struggle to be first.  
 29 **breach**: Not in the sense of a "breach birth."  
 30 **Zerah**: Possibly connoting "red of dawn"—connecting with the crimson thread of verse 28 (and possibly paralleling Esav, who was also known as Edom, the "Red One").  
 39:1 **Potifar . . .** : The narrative resumes exactly, almost literally, where it had left off in 37:36.  
 2 **a man of success**: Or "a man blessed by success."  
 4 **over his house**: Foreshadowing Yosef's eventual position and title (41:40).

- 6 So he left everything that was his in Yosef's hands,  
not concerning himself about anything with him there,  
except for the bread that he ate.  
Now Yosef was fair of form and fair to look at.
- 7 Now after these events it was  
that his lord's wife fixed her eyes upon Yosef  
and said:  
Lie with me!
- 8 But he refused,  
he said to his lord's wife:  
Look, my lord need not concern himself with anything in  
the house, with me here,  
and everything that belongs to him, he has placed in my  
hands.
- 9 He is no greater in this house than I  
and has withheld nothing from me  
except for yourself,  
since you are his wife.  
So how could I do this great ill?  
I would be sinning against God!
- 10 Now it was, as she would speak to Yosef day after day, that  
he would not hearken to her, to lie beside her, to be with  
her—
- 11 so it was, on such a day,  
when he came into the house to do his work,  
and none of the house-people was there in the house—
- 12 that she grabbed him by his garment, saying:  
Lie with me!  
But he left his garment in her hand and fled, escaping  
outside.
- 13 Now it was, when she saw that he had left his garment in  
her hand and had fled outside,
- 14 that she called in her house-people and said to them, saying:  
See! He has brought to us  
a Hebrew man to play around with us!  
He came to me, to lie with me,  
but I called out with a loud voice,
- 15 and it was, when he heard that I raised my voice and called  
out

- that he left his garment beside me and fled, escaping outside!
- 16 Now she kept his garment beside her, until his lord came back to the house.
- 17 Then she spoke to him according to these words, saying: There came to me the Hebrew servant whom you brought to us, to play around with me;
- 18 but it was, when I raised my voice and called out, that he left his garment beside me and fled outside.
- 19 Now it was, when his lord heard his wife's words which she spoke to him, saying: According to these words, your servant did to me!—that his anger raged;
- 

then to the attempted seduction (v.7), and finally to authority again (v.21) (Alter).

The chapter also repeats the phrase “And it was” (in one form or another) some twelve times, as a distinct stylistic pattern.

Yosef's temporary downfall occurs here for reasons beyond literary balance or suspense. It is in a very real sense the punishment for the bratty behavior of his adolescence. Once again words (this time not his own) get him into trouble (vv.17, 19), as they did in 37:8. And once again a garment is cited as proof of a fabricated crime.

6 **left**: Consigned; see also verse 13 for a play on words. **except for the bread that he ate**: Since the Egyptians did not eat with foreigners (see, for instance, 43:32). **fair of form and fair to look at**: The only other person in the Bible described in exactly these words is Rahel, Yosef's mother (29:17). We are thus given an indirect clue about the source of Yaakov's doting behavior in the Yosef story.

9 **sinning**: Or “at fault.” **against God**: From this point on, it is clear that Yosef is no longer the spoiled brat of Chapter 37. At key points in his life he consistently makes mention of God as the source of his success and good fortune (40:8; 41:16; 45:5, 7, 9).

10 **to lie beside her, to be with her**: A curious expression. Why does not the text say, as in verse 7, “to lie with her”? There is an additional irony: “to be with” usually refers to God (see verse 2, for example).

14 **play around**: A sexual reference.

15 **beside**: Three times here, the word perhaps suggests to the audience that Yosef's garment is all that she will ever get “to lie beside her.”

- 20 Yosef's lord took him and put him in the dungeon house,  
in the place where the king's prisoners are imprisoned.  
But while he was there in the dungeon house,  
21 YHWH was with Yosef and extended kindness to him:  
he put his favor in the eyes of the dungeon warden.  
22 And the dungeon warden put in Yosef's hands all the  
prisoners that were in the dungeon house;  
whatever had to be done there, it was he that did it.  
23 The dungeon warden did not need to see to anything at all  
in his hands,  
since YHWH was with him,  
and whatever he did, YHWH made succeed.

- 40:1 Now after these events it was  
that the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt fell  
afoul of their lord, the king of Egypt.  
2 Pharaoh became infuriated with his two officials, with the  
chief cupbearer and the chief baker,  
3 and he placed them in custody in the house of the chief of  
the guard, in the dungeon house, the place where Yosef  
was imprisoned.  
4 The chief of the guard appointed Yosef for them, that he  
should wait upon them.  
They were in custody for many days.  
5 And then the two of them dreamt a dream, each man his  
own dream, in a single night,  
each man according to his dream's interpretation,  
the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were  
imprisoned in the dungeon house.  
6 When Yosef came to them in the morning and saw them,  
here, they were dejected!  
7 So he asked Pharaoh's officials who were with him in  
custody in the house of his lord, saying:  
Why are your faces in such ill-humor today?  
8 They said to him:  
We have dreamt a dream, and there is no interpreter for it!  
Yosef said to them:  
Are not interpretations from God?  
Pray recount them to me!

- 9 The chief cupbearer recounted his dream to Yosef, he said to him:  
 In my dream—  
 here, a vine was in front of me,  
 10 and on the vine, three winding-tendrils,  
 and just as it was budding, the blossom came up,  
 (and) its clusters ripened into grapes.  
 11 Now Pharaoh's cup was in my hand—  
 I picked the grapes  
 and squeezed them into Pharaoh's cup  
 and put the cup in Pharaoh's palm.  
 12 Yosef said to him:  
 This is its interpretation:  
 The three windings are three days—
- 

*The Rise to Power: Dreams* (40:1–41:52): Continued are the themes of Yosef's success in adversity and skill in interpreting dreams (yet his father and brother, and not he, had done the interpreting in Chapter 37!). In Chapter 37 dreams had brought about his downfall; here (Chapter 40) they will help the cupbearer and in Chapter 41 ultimately save a country, his family, and himself. Yosef's self-assurance and reliance on God, already evident in 39:9, here mean that it will not be long before he stands at the pinnacle.

Yosef's dramatic rise to power is an old and favorite motif in folklore. The text colorfully presents Pharaoh's dreams, in great detail, especially in his emotional retelling. All the more striking then is Yosef's simple interpretation (41:23–27).

20 **dungeon:** Hebrew obscure.

21 **kindness:** Or "faithfulness," "loyalty." See 32:11.

40:1 **the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt:** The Hebrew has "the cupbearer of the king of Egypt and the baker," a common construction in biblical Hebrew.

2 **cupbearer:** Others use "butler."

4 **appointed Yosef:** As Potifar had "appointed him over his house" (39:4).

5 **interpretation:** Or "meaning."

8 **Are not interpretations from God:** Foreshadowing 41:16, "Not I! God will answer. . . ."

11 **Pharaoh's cup:** The cup was a common symbol of fate in the ancient Near East.

- 13 in another three days  
Pharaoh will lift up your head,  
he will restore you to your position  
so that you will put Pharaoh's cup in his hand (once more),  
according to the former practice, when you were his  
cupbearer.
- 14 But keep me in mind with you, when it goes well for you,  
pray deal kindly with me and call me to mind to Pharaoh,  
so that you have me brought out of this house.
- 15 For I was stolen, yes, stolen from the land of the Hebrews,  
and here too I have done nothing  
that they should have put me in this pit.
- 16 Now when the chief baker saw that he had interpreted for  
good,  
he said to Yosef:  
I too, in my dream—  
here, three baskets of white-bread were on my head,  
17 and in the uppermost basket, all sorts of edibles for  
Pharaoh, baker's work,  
and birds were eating them from the basket, from off my  
head.
- 18 Yosef gave answer, he said:  
This is its interpretation:  
The three baskets are three days—  
19 in another three days  
Pharaoh will lift up your head  
from off you,  
he will hang you on a tree,  
and the birds will eat your flesh from off you.
- 20 And thus it was, on the third day,  
Pharaoh's birthday,  
that he made a great drinking-feast for all his servants,  
and he lifted up the head of the chief cupbearer and the  
head of the chief baker amidst his servants:  
21 he restored the chief cupbearer to his cupbearership,  
so that he put the cup in Pharaoh's palm (once more),  
22 but the chief baker he hanged,  
just as Yosef had interpreted to them.

23 But the chief cupbearer did not keep Yosef in mind,  
he forgot him.

41:1 Now at the end of two years'-time it was  
that Pharaoh dreamt:  
here, he was standing by the Nile-Stream,  
2 and here, out of the Nile, seven cows were coming up,  
fair to look at and fat of flesh,  
and they grazed in the reed-grass.  
3 And here, seven other cows were coming up after them out  
of the Nile,  
ill to look at and lean of flesh,  
and they stood beside the other cows on the bank of the  
Nile.  
4 Then the cows ill to look at and lean of flesh ate up  
the seven cows fair to look at, the fat-ones.  
Pharaoh awoke.  
5 He fell asleep and dreamt a second time:  
here, seven ears-of-grain were going up on a single stalk, fat  
and good,  
6 and here, seven ears, lean and scorched by the east wind,  
were springing up after them.

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13 **lift up your head:** A parallel expression in Assyrian means “release” or “pardon.”

14 **with you:** Possibly stressing the personal nature of the plea.

15 **stolen:** The Yaakov motif of Chapters 30–31.

16 **white-bread:** Others use “wicker.”

17fi. **eating:** In Pharaoh’s dreams of Chapter 41, “eating” comes to symbolize the disaster of famine.

19 **hang . . . on a tree:** Others use “impale on a stake.”

23 **he forgot him:** Here, as in Potifar’s house, initial success gives way to failure and continued imprisonment.

41:1 **two years'-time:** Lit. “two years of days.”

2 **cows:** In later (Ptolemaic) Egyptian inscriptions, as here, cows represent years.

5 **fat and good:** Referring to the ears of grain.

- 7 Then the lean ears swallowed up  
the seven ears fat and full.  
Pharaoh awoke,  
and here: (it was) a dream!
- 8 But in the morning it was, that his spirit was agitated,  
so he sent and had all of Egypt's magicians and all of its  
wise-men called.  
Pharaoh recounted his dream to them,  
but no one could interpret them to Pharaoh.
- 9 Then the chief cupbearer spoke up to Pharaoh, saying:  
I must call my faults to mind today!
- 10 Pharaoh was once infuriated with his servants  
and placed me in custody, in the house of the chief of the  
guard,  
myself and the chief baker.
- 11 And we dreamt a dream in a single night, I and he,  
we dreamt each man according to the interpretation of his  
dream.
- 12 Now there was a Hebrew lad there with us, a servant of the  
chief of the guard;  
we recounted them to him, and he interpreted our dreams  
to us,  
for each man according to his dream he interpreted.
- 13 And thus it was: As he interpreted to us, so it was—  
I was restored to my position, and he was hanged.
- 14 Pharaoh sent and had Yosef called.  
They hurriedly brought him out of the pit;  
he shaved, changed his clothes, and came before Pharaoh.
- 15 Pharaoh said to Yosef:  
I have dreamt a dream, and there is no interpreter for it!  
But I have heard it said of you  
that you but need to hear a dream in order to interpret it.
- 16 Yosef answered Pharaoh, saying:  
Not I!  
God will answer what is for Pharaoh's welfare.
- 17 Pharaoh spoke to Yosef:  
In my dream—  
here, I was standing on the bank of the Nile,
- 18 and here, out of the Nile were coming up seven cows,

- fat of flesh and fair of form,  
and they grazed in the reed-grass.
- 19 And here, seven other cows were coming up after them,  
wretched and exceedingly ill of form and lank of flesh,  
in all the land of Egypt I have never seen their like for  
ill-condition!
- 20 Then the seven lank and ill-looking cows ate up  
the first seven cows, the fat-ones.
- 21 They entered their body, but you would not know that they  
had entered their body, for they were as ill-looking as at  
the beginning!  
Then I awoke.
- 22 And I saw (again) in my dream:  
here, seven ears were going up on a single stalk, full and  
good,
- 23 and here, seven ears, hardened, lean, and scorched by the  
east wind, were springing up after them.
- 24 Then the lean ears swallowed up  
the seven good ears!  
Now I have spoken with the magicians, but there is no one  
that can tell me the answer!
- 25 Yosef said to Pharaoh:  
Pharaoh's dream is one.  
What God is about to do, he has told Pharaoh.
- 26 The seven good cows  
are seven years,  
the seven good ears  
are seven years,  
the dream is one.
- 

- 8 **his dream:** The two dreams function as one, as Yosef explains.
- 19 **in all the land . . . I have never seen their like:** Pharaoh's description of his dream is more vivid than the narrator's (vv.1-4).
- 25 **is one:** Or "has a single meaning."
- 26ff. **The seven good cows . . . :** Yosef's interpretation is highly structured. The rhetoric emphasizes the last line of verse 27: after hearing "x are seven years," three times, we hear "x will be seven years of famine!" See above, 40:19, where "Pharaoh will lift up your head" is followed by "from off you."

- 27 And the seven lank and ill-looking cows that were coming  
up after them  
are seven years,  
and the seven ears, hollow and scorched by the east wind,  
will be seven years of famine!
- 28 That is the word that I spoke to Pharaoh:  
what God is about to do, he has let Pharaoh see.
- 29 Here,  
seven years are coming  
of great abundance in all the land of Egypt.
- 30 But seven years of famine will arise after them,  
when all the abundance in the land of Egypt will be  
forgotten.  
The famine will destroy the land,
- 31 and you will not know of that abundance in the land  
because of that famine afterward,  
for it will be exceedingly heavy.
- 32 Now as for the twofold repetition of the dream to Pharaoh:  
it means that the matter is determined by God,  
and God is hastening to do it.
- 33 So now, let Pharaoh select a discerning and wise man,  
and set him over the land of Egypt.
- 34 Let Pharaoh do this: let him appoint appointed-overseers  
for the land,  
dividing the land of Egypt into five parts during the seven  
years of abundance.
- 35 Let them collect all kinds of food from these good years  
that are coming,  
and let them pile up grain under Pharaoh's hand as  
food-provisions in the cities, and keep it under guard.
- 36 So the provisions will be an appointed-reserve for the land  
for the seven years of famine that will occur in the land of  
Egypt,  
so that the land will not be cut off by the famine.
- 37 The words seemed good in Pharaoh's eyes and in the eyes  
of all his servants,
- 38 and Pharaoh said to his servants:  
Could we find another like him, a man in whom is the spirit  
of a god?
- 39 Pharaoh said to Yosef:

- Since a god has made you know all this,  
there is none as wise and discerning as you;  
40 you shall be the One Over My House!  
To your orders shall all my people submit;  
only by the throne will I be greater than you!
- 41 Pharaoh said further to Yosef:  
See, I place you over all the land of Egypt!
- 42 And Pharaoh removed his signet-ring from his hand and  
placed it on Yosef's hand,  
he had him clothed in linen garments and put the gold  
chain upon his neck;
- 43 he had him mount the chariot of his second-in-rank, and  
they called out before him: *Avrekhh*!/Attention!  
Thus he placed him over all the land of Egypt.
- 44 Pharaoh said to Yosef:  
I am Pharaoh,  
but without you, no man shall raise hand or foot in all the  
land of Egypt!
- 45 Pharaoh called Yosef's name: *Tzafenat Pane'ah*/The God  
Speaks and He Lives.  
He gave him Asenat, daughter of Poti Fera, priest of On, as  
a wife.  
And Yosef's influence went out over all the land of Egypt.

- 
- 34 **let him appoint appointed-overseers:** We already know that Yosef is a man often entrusted with responsibility—"appointed" (39:4, 40:4). **dividing . . . into five parts:** Hebrew obscure. B-R uses "arm (the land of Egypt)."
- 35 **hand:** I.e., supervision.
- 36 **the land:** I.e., its people.
- 37 **The words seemed good:** Words now bring about Yosef's rise to power.
- 40 **the One Over My House:** A title similar to that of Yosef's steward in 43:16ff. **submit:** Hebrew obscure. **only by the throne:** Similar to Yosef's situation in Potifar's house, "He is no greater in this house than I" (39:9)—but he withholds his wife.
- 41ff. **all the land of Egypt:** A refrain here, pointing to Yosef's power.
- 43 ***Avrekhh*/Attention:** Hebrew unclear. Some suggest that it is Hebrew for "bend the knee," others that it resembles an Assyrian title.
- 45 ***Tzafenat-Pane'ah*/ The God Speaks and He Lives:** An Egyptian name which is appropriate to the story. Yosef lives, and through him, so do Egypt, his family, and the future People of Israel. **Yosef's influence:** Perhaps an idiom, or merely "Yosef went out."

- 46 Now Yosef was thirty years old when he stood in the presence of Pharaoh, king of Egypt.  
Yosef went out from Pharaoh's presence and passed through all the land of Egypt.
- 47 In the seven years of abundance the land produced in handfuls.
- 48 And he collected all kinds of provisions from those seven years that occurred in the land of Egypt, and placed provisions in the cities.  
The provisions from the fields of a city, surrounding it, he placed in it (as well).
- 49 So Yosef piled up grain like the sand of the sea, exceedingly much, until they had to stop counting, for it was uncountable.
- 50 Now two sons were born to Yosef, before the year of famine came,  
whom Asenat, daughter of Poti Fera, priest of On, bore to him.
- 51 Yosef called the name of the firstborn:  
Menashe/He-Who-Makes-Forget,  
meaning: God has made-me-forget all my hardships, all my father's house.
- 52 And the name of the second he called:  
Efrayim/Double-Fruit,  
meaning: God has made me bear fruit in the land of my affliction.
- 53 There came to an end the seven years of abundance that had occurred in the land of Egypt,
- 54 and there started to come the seven years of famine, as Yosef had said.  
Famine occurred in all lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread.
- 55 But when all the land of Egypt felt the famine, and the people cried out to Pharaoh for bread,  
Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians:

Go to Yosef, whatever he says to you, do!

56 Now the famine was over all the surface of the earth.

Yosef opened up all (storehouses) in which there was (grain), and gave-out-rations to the Egyptians, since the famine was becoming stronger in the land of Egypt.

57 And all lands came to Egypt to buy rations, to Yosef, for the famine was strong in all lands.

42:1 Now when Yaakov saw that there were rations in Egypt, Yaakov said to his sons:

Why do you keep looking at one another?

2 And he said:

Here, I have heard that there are rations in Egypt, go down there and buy us rations from there, that we may live and not die.

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*Famine: The Brothers Come* (41:53–42:38): Worldwide famine creates the backdrop for the family drama that is about to unfold. The ancients understood famine as sent by the gods, often as punishment; and the events of our text suggest that God is indeed the prime mover here. We are again presented with the characters of Chapter 37, all of whom have somehow changed. Yaakov emerges as more pitiful than ever (a shadow of the wrestler at the Yabbok), Yosef as powerful governor, not only of all Egypt but of his family's destiny as well, and the brothers, remarkably, are repentant (42:21–22). We also see Yosef's emotional side for the first time. He weeps in 42:24, as he will do three times again (43:30; 45:2, 14, 15).

46 **thirty**: Yosef will be in power for eighty years ( $2 \times 40$ ), another patterned number.

51 **Menashe**: Trad. English "Menasseh." **made-me-forget**: Yet he does not forget for long, any more than the cupbearer did (Chapter 41).

52 **bear fruit . . . affliction**: Two expressions from the stories about the Patriarchs.

54ff. **Famine occurred in all lands**: The repetition of "all" here brings home the totality of the famine.

42:2 **that we may live and not die**: This becomes a refrain in the story, alternating in meaning between Yosef's family (here and 43:8) and the Egyptians (47:19).

- 3 So Yosef's brothers went down, ten (of them),  
to buy some rationed grain from Egypt.
- 4 But Binyamin, Yosef's brother, Yaakov would not send  
with his brothers,  
for he said: Lest harm befall him!
- 5 The sons of Yisrael came to buy rations among those that  
came,  
for the famine was in the land of Canaan.
- 6 Now Yosef was the governor over the land, it was he who  
supplied rations to all the people of the land.  
And Yosef's brothers came and bowed low to him, brow to  
the ground.
- 7 When Yosef saw his brothers, he recognized them,  
but he pretended-no-recognition of them and spoke harshly  
with them.  
He said to them:  
From where do you come?  
They said: From the land of Canaan, to buy food-rations.
- 8 Now although Yosef recognized his brothers, for their part,  
they did not recognize him.
- 9 And Yosef was reminded of the dreams that he had dreamt  
of them.  
He said to them:  
You are spies!  
It is to see the nakedness of the land that you have come!
- 10 They said to him: No, my lord!  
Rather, your servants have come to buy food-rations.
- 11 We are all of us the sons of a single man,  
we are honest,  
your servants have never been spies!
- 12 But he said to them:  
No!  
For it is the nakedness of the land that you have come to  
see!
- 13 They said:  
Your servants are twelve,  
we are brothers,  
sons of a single man in the land of Canaan:

- the youngest is with our father now,  
and one is no more.
- 14 Yosef said to them:  
It is just as I spoke to you, saying: You are spies!
- 15 Hereby shall you be tested:  
As Pharaoh lives!  
You shall not depart from this (place)  
unless your youngest brother comes here!
- 16 Send one of you to fetch your brother,  
while (the rest of) you remain as prisoners.  
Thus will your words be tested, whether there is truth in  
you or not—  
as Pharaoh lives, indeed, you are spies!
- 17 He removed them into custody for three days.
- 18 Yosef said to them on the third day:  
Do this, and stay alive,  
for I fear God:
- 19 if you are honest,  
let one of your brothers be held prisoner in the house of  
your custody,  
and as for you, go, bring back rations for the famine-supply  
of your households.
- 20 Then bring your youngest brother back to me,  
so that your words will be proven truthful, and you will not  
die.  
They (prepared to) do so.
- 

4 **Yosef's brother:** His full brother, as opposed to the others who were half-brothers.

7 **recognized:** Ironically recalling the brothers' "Pray recognize" of 37:32.  
**pretended-no-recognition:** Others use "pretended to be a stranger."

9 **nakedness:** Vulnerability (strategically).

11 **honest:** They will be, by the end of the chapter (Redford).

13 **twelve:** At last they think of themselves as a unit, "we are brothers!"

16 **tested:** Heb. *bahan*, a different root from the word translated "tested" (*nissa*) in 22:1. Interestingly, the English "test" and the Hebrew *bhn* originally meant the refining of metals, separating pure from impure. or not—: Or "(in you.)/ If not. . . ."

- 21 But they said, each man to his brother:  
Truly,  
we are guilty:  
concerning our brother!  
—that we saw his heart's distress  
when he implored us,  
and we did not listen.  
Therefore this distress has come upon us!
- 22 Re'uven answered them, saying:  
Did I not say to you, say: Do not sin against the child!  
But you would not listen,  
so for his blood—now, satisfaction is demanded!
- 23 Now they did not know that Yosef was listening, for a  
translator was between them.
- 24 But he turned away from them and wept.  
When he was able to return to them, he spoke to them  
and had Shim'on taken away from them, imprisoning him  
before their eyes.
- 25 Then Yosef commanded that they fill their vessels with  
grain  
and return their silver-pieces into each man's sack,  
and give them victuals for the journey.  
They did so for them.
- 26 Then they loaded their rations onto their asses and went  
from there.
- 27 But as one opened his sack to give his ass fodder at the  
night-camp,  
he saw his silver—there it was in the mouth of his pack!
- 28 He said to his brothers:  
My silver has been returned—yes, here in my pack!  
Their hearts gave way, and they trembled to one another,  
saying:  
What is this that God has done to us?
- 29 They came home to Yaakov their father, in the land of  
Canaan,  
and told him all that had befallen them, saying:
- 30 The man, the lord of the land, spoke harshly with us,  
he took us for those that spy on the land!

- 31 Now we said to him: We are honest, we have never been spies!
- 32 We are twelve, brothers all, sons of our father: one is no more, and the youngest is now with our father in the land of Canaan.
- 33 Then the man, the lord of the land, said to us: Hereby shall I know whether you are honest: Leave one of your brothers with me, and as for the famine-supply of your households, take it and go.
- 34 But bring your youngest brother back to me, so that I may know that you are not spies, that you are honest.  
(Then) I will give your brother back to you, and you may travel about the land.
- 35 But it was, when they emptied their sacks: there was each man's silver pouch in his sack!  
They looked at their silver pouches, they and their father, and became frightened.
- 36 Yaakov their father said to them:  
It is me that you bereave!  
Yosef is no more,  
Shim'on is no more,
- 

- 21 **guilty:** Perhaps it is the phrase "youngest brother" in Yosef's words (v.20) that jars their memory. They must now show responsibility to their father, which they had evaded in Chapter 37. **distress. . . distress:** Another example of strict justice in the Bible: the punishment fits the crime.
- 22 **Re'uven:** A replay of Chapter 37, with Re'uven again making extravagant but ineffective declarations. Once again Yehuda will emerge in charge.
- 23 **translator:** Interpreter.
- 24 **imprisoning:** Or "fettering." **before their eyes:** As opposed to the sale of Yosef, where their presence is not mentioned, strictly speaking.
- 25 **they fill:** "They" refers to Yosef's servants. **silver-pieces:** Yosef had been sold for silver (37:28).
- 30 **The man:** Used eight times of Yosef in Chapters 42-44, perhaps out of ironic anonymity. **harshly:** Paralleling their earlier attitude: they "could not speak to him in peace" (37:4).

now you would take Binyamin—  
upon me has all this come!

37 Re'uven said to his father, saying:  
My two sons you may put to death  
if I do not bring him back to you!  
Place him in my hands, and I myself will return him to  
you.

38 But he said:  
My son is not to go down with you!  
For his brother is dead,  
and he alone is left!  
Should harm befall him on the journey on which you are  
going,  
you will bring down my gray hair in grief to Sheol!

43:1 But the famine was heavy in the land.

2 And so it was, when they had finished eating the rations  
that they had brought from Egypt,  
that their father said to them:  
Return, buy us some food-rations.

3 But Yehuda said to him, saying:  
The man warned, yes, warned us,  
saying: You shall not see my face unless your brother is  
with you.

4 If you wish to send our brother with us, we will go down  
and buy you some food-rations.

5 But if you do not wish to send him, we will not go down,  
for the man said to us: You shall not see my face unless  
your brother is with you.

6 Yisrael said:  
Why did you deal so ill with me, by telling the man that  
you have another brother?

7 They said:  
The man asked, he asked about us and about our kindred,  
saying: Is your father still alive? Do you have another  
brother?

So we told him, according to these words.

Could we know, know that he would say: Bring your  
brother down?

- 8 Yehuda said to Yisrael his father:  
 Send the lad with me,  
 and we will arise and go,  
 that we may live and not die,  
 so we, so you, so our little-ones!
- 9 I will act as his pledge,  
 at my hand you may seek him!  
 If I do not bring him back to you  
 and set him in your presence,  
 I will be culpable-for-sin against you all the days (of my  
 life).
- 

*The Test (43–44):* Yosef's testing of his brothers is masterful, not only because of the plan itself, but also because of the depth of emotion that the text evokes in its characterizations. It demonstrates how well the whole story has been integrated into the Yaakov material, for here as well as there long conversations are used to reveal complex passions.

Some have questioned the morality of Yosef's actions, seeing that the aged Yaakov might well have died while the test was progressing, without ever finding out that Yosef had survived. But that is not the point of the story. What it is trying to teach (among other things) is a lesson about crime and repentance. Only by recreating something of the original situation—the brothers are again in control of the life and death of a son of Rahel—can Yosef be sure that they have changed. Once the brothers pass the test, life and covenant can then continue.

- 37 **My two sons:** Re'uven is again spouting nonsense. **I myself will return him:** But he did not in 37:22 (Ackerman).
- 38 **My son is not to go down. . . . you will bring down my gray hair in grief:** Yaakov will indeed "go down," but to Egypt, not to Sheol, to meet his "dead" son. The latter part of the phrase is basically repeated in 44:29 and 44:31, as a key to the father's feelings. **he alone is left:** Of his mother Rahel (see 44:20).
- 43:3 **my face:** The great confrontation theme of the Yaakov stories returns.
- 4–5 **send:** Or "release," "let go."
- 9 **I will act as his pledge/ at my hand you may seek him:** Echoing Yaakov's own language of responsibility in 31:39 ("I would make good the loss/ at my hand you would seek it"). **in your presence:** Literally, "before your face."

- 10 Indeed, had we not lingered, we would indeed have been  
back twice already!
- 11 Yisrael their father said to them:  
If it must be so, then, do this:  
Take some of the produce of the land in your vessels  
and bring them down to the man as a gift:  
a little balsam, a little honey, balm and ladanum, pistachio  
nuts and almonds.
- 12 And silver two times over take in your hand;  
and the silver that was returned in the mouth of your packs,  
return in your hand,  
perhaps it was an oversight.
- 13 And as for your brother, take him!  
Arise, return to the man,
- 14 and may God Shaddai give you mercy before the man,  
so that he releases your other brother to you, and Binyamin  
as well.  
And as for me—if I must be bereaved, I must be bereaved!
- 15 The men took this gift, silver two times over they took in  
their hand  
and Binyamin as well.  
They arose and went down to Egypt  
and stood in Yosef's presence.
- 16 When Yosef saw Binyamin with them,  
he said to the steward of his house:  
Bring the men into the house, slaughter some  
slaughter-animals and prepare them,  
for it is with me that these men shall eat at noon.
- 17 The man did as Yosef had said, the man brought the men  
into Yosef's house.
- 18 But the men were frightened that they had been brought  
into Yosef's house, and said:  
It is because of the silver that was returned in our packs  
before that we have been brought here,  
for (them to) roll upon us, and fall upon us,  
and take us into servitude, along with our asses!
- 19 They came close to the man, to the steward of Yosef's  
house, and spoke to him at the entrance to the house,
- 20 they said:

- Please, my lord!  
 We came down, came down before to buy food-rations,  
 21 but it was, when we came to the night camp and opened  
     our packs,  
     there was each man's silver in the mouth of his pack, our  
     silver by its exact weight—  
     but (here) we have returned it in our hand!  
 22 And other silver as well we have brought down in our hand,  
     to buy food.  
     We do not know who put back our silver in our packs!  
 23 He said:  
     It is well with you, do not be afraid!  
     Your God, the God of your father, placed a treasure in your  
     packs for you—(for) your silver has come in to me.  
     And he brought Shim'on out to them.  
 24 Then the man had the men come into Yosef's house  
     and gave them water so that they might wash their feet  
     and gave them fodder for their asses.  
 25 They prepared the gift, until Yosef came back at noon,  
     for they understood that they were to eat bread there.  
 26 When Yosef came into the house, they brought him the gift  
     that was in their hand, into the house,  
     and bowed down to him, to the ground.  
 27 He asked after their welfare and said:  
     Is your old father well, of whom you spoke?  
     Is he still alive?
- 

- 11 **Take:** Three times, culminating in the pathetic "And as for your brother, take him!" (v.13). **balsam . . . honey, balm and ladanum, pistachio nuts and almonds:** Another example of concealment in the story. The list includes the cargo of the caravan that carried Yosef away (37:25).  
 12 **two times over . . . oversight:** Heb. *mishne* . . . *mishge*.  
 14 **God Shaddai:** Yaakov uses the same term for God as did his father, when Yaakov left for Aram (28:3). **bereaved:** Echoing the fears of his mother Rivka (27:45).  
 18 **roll upon us:** Others use "attack us." **roll upon us, and fall upon us:** The rhythm reflects the brothers' emotional anguish.  
 23 **has come in:** I.e., I have received full payment.  
 27 **well:** Or "at peace"—as before, a key element of the Yaakov stories.

- 28 They said:  
Your servant, our father, is well, he is still alive—  
and in homage they bowed low.
- 29 He lifted up his eyes and saw Binyamin his brother, his  
mother's son,  
and he said:  
Is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me?  
And he said:  
May God show you favor, my son!
- 30 And in haste—for his feelings were so kindled toward his  
brother that he had to weep—  
Yosef entered a chamber and wept there.
- 31 Then he washed his face and came out, he restrained  
himself, and said:  
Serve bread!
- 32 They served him by himself and them by themselves and  
the Egyptians who were eating with him by themselves,  
for Egyptians will not eat bread with Hebrews—for that is  
an abomination for Egyptians.
- 33 But they were seated in his presence:  
the firstborn according to his rank-as-firstborn and the  
youngest according to his rank-as-youngest.  
And the men stared at each other in astonishment over it.
- 34 He had courses taken to them from his presence,  
and Binyamin's course was five times greater than all their  
courses.  
Then they drank and became drunk with him.
- 44:1 Now he commanded the steward of his house, saying:  
Fill the men's packs with food, as much as they are able to  
carry,  
and put each man's silver in the mouth of his pack.
- 2 And my goblet, the silver goblet, put in the mouth of the  
youngest's pack, along with the silver for his rations.  
He did according to Yosef's word which he had spoken.
- 3 At morning light, the men were sent off, they and their  
asses;
- 4 they were just outside the city—they had not yet gone far—  
when Yosef said to the steward of his house:

- Up, pursue the men, and when you have caught up with them, say to them:  
 Why have you paid back ill for good?  
 5 Is not this (goblet) the one that my lord drinks with?  
 And he also divines, yes, divines with it!  
 You have wrought ill in what you have done!  
 6 When he caught up with them, he spoke those words to them.  
 7 They said to him:  
 Why does my lord speak such words as these?  
 Heaven forbid for your servants to do such a thing!  
 8 Here, the silver that we found in the mouth of our packs,  
 we returned to you from the land of Canaan;  
 so how could we steal silver or gold from the house of your lord?  
 9 He with whom it is found among your servants, he shall die,  
 and we also will become my lord's servants!  
 10 He said:  
 Now as well, according to your words, so be it:  
 he with whom it is found shall become my servant, but you shall be clear.  
 11 With haste each man let down his pack to the ground, each man opened his pack.  
 12 and then he searched: with the eldest he started and with the youngest he finished—  
 and the goblet was found in Binyamin's pack!

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29 **Is this:** Or "So this is."

34 **five times:** Others use "many times." Yet the prominence of the number five throughout the Yosef story, as noted above, should not be overlooked.

44:2 **my goblet:** The ensuing scene is somewhat parallel to Rahel's theft of the *terafim* (compare verse 9 with 31:32).

5 **divines:** Cups were used in predicting the future in the ancient Near East; see note to 40:11. The diviner would examine the shapes made by insoluble liquids, such as oil in water. **You have wrought ill:** Resembling Laban's accusation against Yaakov, "You have done foolishly" (31:28).

10 **clear:** Of punishment.

- 13 They rent their clothes,  
each man loaded up his ass, and they returned to the city.
- 14 Yehuda and his brothers came into Yosef's house  
—he was still there—  
and flung themselves down before him to the ground.
- 15 Yosef said to them:  
What kind of deed is this that you have done!  
Do you not know that a man like me can divine, yes divine?
- 16 Yehuda said:  
What can we say to my lord?  
What can we speak, by what can we show ourselves  
innocent?  
God has found out your servants' crime!  
Here we are, servants to my lord, so we, so the one in  
whose hand the goblet was found.
- 17 But he said:  
Heaven forbid that I should do this!  
The man in whose hand the goblet was found—he shall  
become my servant,  
but you—go up in peace to your father!
- 18 Now Yehuda came closer to him and said:  
Please, my lord,  
pray let your servant speak a word in the ears of my lord,  
and do not let your anger rage against your servant,  
for you are like Pharaoh!
- 19 My lord asked his servants, saying: Do you have a father or  
another brother?
- 20 And we said to my lord: We have an old father  
and a young child of his old age,  
whose brother is dead,  
so that he alone is left of his mother,  
and his father loves him.
- 21 And you said to your servants: Bring him down to me, I  
wish to set my eyes upon him.
- 22 But we said to my lord:  
The lad cannot leave his father,  
were he to leave his father, he would die.
- 23 But you said to your servants: If your youngest brother does  
not come down with you, you shall not see my face again.

- 24 Now it was, when we went up to your servant, my father,  
we told him my lord's words,  
25 and our father said: Return, buy us some food-rations.  
26 But we said: We cannot go down;  
if our youngest brother is with us, then we will go down,  
for we cannot see the man's face if our youngest brother is  
not with us.  
27 Now your servant, my father, said to us:  
You yourselves know  
that my wife bore two to me.  
28 One went away from me,  
I said: For sure he is torn, torn-to-pieces!  
And I have not seen him again thus far.  
29 Now should you take away this one as well from before my  
face,  
should harm befall him, you will bring down my gray hair  
in ill-fortune to Sheol!  
30 So now,  
when I come back to your servant, my father, and the lad is  
not with us,  
—with whose life his own life is bound up!—  
31 it will be, that when he sees that the lad is no more, he will  
die,  
and your servant will have brought down the gray hair of  
your servant, our father, in grief to Sheol!
- 

16 **your servants' crime:** Of selling Yosef?

17 **But he said:** "He" is Yosef. **this:** Enslaving all of the brothers.

18 **Now Yehuda . . . said . . . :** Yehuda's great speech, masterful in its rhetoric, is chiefly aimed at stirring up sympathy for the father; it contains the word "father" fourteen times. Binyamin, whose appearance actually causes Yosef great anguish, is hardly treated as a personality at all. **you are like Pharaoh:** Lit. "like you is like Pharaoh."

22 **he would die:** "He" refers to Yaakov, although the Hebrew is somewhat ambiguous.

28 **thus far:** A hint that Yosef is still alive, or perhaps a tiny expression of hope.

30 **life:** Heb. *nefesh*, also "emotions" or "feelings."

31 **our father:** Is Yehuda unknowingly including Yosef?

32 For your servant pledged himself for the lad to my father,  
saying: If I do not bring him back to you, I will be  
culpable-for-sin against my father all the days (of my life).

33 So now,  
pray let your servant stay instead of the lad, as servant to  
my lord,  
but let the lad go up with his brothers!

34 For how can I go up to my father, when the lad is not with  
me?  
Then would I see the ill-fortune that would come upon my  
father!

45:1 Yosef could no longer restrain himself in the presence of all  
who were stationed around him,  
he called out:

Have everyone leave me!

So no one stood (in attendance upon) him when Yosef made  
himself known to his brothers.

2 He put forth his voice in weeping:  
the Egyptians heard, Pharaoh's household heard.

3 Then Yosef said to his brothers:  
I am Yosef. Is my father still alive?  
But his brothers were not able to answer him,  
for they were confounded in his presence.

4 Yosef said to his brothers:  
Pray come close to me!  
They came close.

He said:

I am Yosef your brother, whom you sold into Egypt.

5 But now, do not be pained,  
and do not let (anger) rage in your eyes that you sold me  
here!

For it was to save life that God sent me on before you.

6 For it is two years now that the famine has been in the  
midst of the land,  
and there are still another five years in which there shall be  
no plowing or harvest.

7 So God sent me on before you

- to make you a remnant on earth,  
to keep you alive as a great body-of-survivors.
- 8 So now,  
it was not you that sent me here, but God!  
He has made me Father to Pharaoh and lord of all his  
household and ruler over all the land of Egypt.
- 9 Make haste, go up to my father and say to him:  
Thus says your son, Yosef:  
God has made me lord of all Egypt;  
come down to me, do not remain!
- 10 You shall stay in the region of Goshen, you shall be near  
me,  
you and your sons and the sons of your sons,  
your sheep, your oxen, and all that is yours.
- 11 I will sustain you there,  
for there are still five years of famine left  
—lest you be as disinherited, you and your household and  
all that is yours.
- 12 Here, your eyes see, as well as my brother Binyamin's eyes,  
that it is my mouth that speaks to you!
- 13 So tell my father of all the weight I carry in Egypt, and of  
all that you have seen,  
and make haste, bring my father down here!

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*Reconciliation* (45): In revealing his true identity at last, Yosef makes two points: first, that it was all part of God's plan; and second, that the family must immediately prepare for migration to Egypt. Thus the personal story is intertwined with the national one, and the text therefore gives limited time and space to psychological details. The motif of God's plan is stressed by the repetition of "God sent me" (vv. 5, 7, 8), while the anticipated bounties of settling in Egypt are brought out by the threefold "good-things of Egypt" (vv. 18, 20, 23) and by the repeated exhortation to "come" (vv. 18, 19).

- 45:5 (**anger**): At each other, or referring to each individual's feelings of guilt.
- 11 **as disinherited**: Or "reduced-to-poverty."
- 13 **all the weight I carry**: I.e., my importance.

- 14 He flung himself upon his brother Binyamin's neck and wept,  
and Binyamin wept upon his neck.
- 15 Then he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them.  
After this his brothers spoke with him.
- 16 The news was heard in Pharaoh's household, they said:  
Yosef's brothers have come!  
It was good in Pharaoh's eyes and in the eyes of his servants.
- 17 And Pharaoh said to Yosef:  
Say to your brothers:  
Do this—  
load your animals and go,  
come back to the land of Canaan;
- 18 fetch your father and your households  
and come to me!  
I will give you the good-things of the land of Egypt,  
so that you will eat of the fat of the land!
- 19 And you, you have been commanded:  
Do this—  
take you wagons from the land of Egypt for your little ones  
and your wives,  
and carry your father down  
and come!
- 20 Let not your eyes look-with-regret on your household-  
wares,  
for the good-things of all the land of Egypt—they are yours!
- 21 The sons of Yisrael did so,  
Yosef gave them wagons in accordance with Pharaoh's  
orders  
and gave them victuals for the journey.
- 22 To all of them, each man, he gave changes of clothes,  
but to Binyamin he gave three hundred pieces of silver and  
five changes of clothes,
- 23 and to his father he sent in like manner:  
ten asses, carrying the good-things of Egypt,  
and ten mares, carrying grain and bread,  
and food for his father, for the journey.

- 24 Then he sent off his brothers, and they went;  
 he said to them:  
 Do not be upset on the journey!
- 25 They went up from Egypt and came to the land of Canaan,  
 to Yaakov their father,
- 26 and they told him, saying:  
 Yosef is still alive!  
 Indeed, he is ruler of all the land of Egypt!  
 His heart failed,  
 for he did not believe them.
- 

*Migration to Egypt* (45:16–47:12): Yaakov's descent to Egypt involves three meetings: with God, with Yosef, and with Pharaoh. The first is God's final revelation to Yaakov. God had previously forbidden Yitzhak to go to Egypt during a famine (26:1–2), but his son may now go as part of the divine plan, his people's destiny. The blessing given to Avraham's children (particularly to Yishmael) is repeated in 46:3, and God will be "with" Yaakov (46:4) on this journey as he has been on others.

The meeting between father and long-lost son is brief but powerful, returning as it does to the "face" motif (46:30). Immediately afterward Yosef gives the family advice on how to demonstrate their usefulness to the Egyptians, and one is struck by the precariousness of their situation in even this best of circumstances.

Yaakov's brief audience with Pharaoh is both moving and pathetic. The Patriarch sums up his life in depressing terms, and it becomes clear that long life (he believes his own to be short), in addition to wealth and fertility, is considered a sign of divine favor.

The actual migration is sketched in a few brief strokes. The list of names in 46:8–27 has been constructed on patterned numbers, with a total of seventy.

- 15 **his brothers spoke with him:** Which they could not do "in peace" in 37:4.
- 16 **come:** The verb focuses toward Pharaoh's invitation to follow: "Yosef's brothers have come!" (v.16) to "and come to me" (v.18) to "and come!" (v.19).
- 18 **good-things:** More precisely, "best-things" ("good" has been retained here to indicate a major theme of the story: good and ill).
- 20 **Let not your eyes look-with-regret:** Possibly "Do not stint."
- 22 **but to Binyamin he gave:** The original situation (Chapter 37) is set up once more; this time the brothers do not react adversely to the youngest son's being favored.

27 But when they spoke to him all of Yosef's words which he  
had spoken to them,  
and when he saw the wagons that Yosef had sent to carry  
him down,  
their father Yaakov's spirit came to life.

28 Yisrael said:  
Enough!  
Yosef my son is still alive;  
I must go and see him before I die!

46:1 Yisrael traveled with all that was his  
and came to Be'er-Sheva,  
and he slaughtered slaughter-offerings to the God of his  
father Yitzhak.

2 And God said to Yisrael in visions of the night,  
he said:  
Yaakov! Yaakov!  
He said:  
Here I am.

3 Now he said:  
I am *El*/God,  
the God of your father.  
Do not be afraid of going down to Egypt,  
for a great nation will I make of you there.

4 I myself  
will go down with you to Egypt,  
and I myself  
will bring you up, yes, up again.  
And Yosef will lay his hand on your eyes.

5 Yaakov departed from Be'er-Sheva.  
Yisrael's sons carried Yaakov their father, their little-ones  
and their wives in the wagons that Pharaoh had sent for  
carrying him,

6 and they took their acquired livestock and their property  
that they had gained in the land of Canaan  
and came to Egypt,  
Yaakov and all his seed with him,

- 7 his sons and the sons of his sons with him, his daughters  
and the daughters of his sons;  
all his seed he brought with him to Egypt.
- 8 Now these are the names of the Sons of Israel who came to  
Egypt:  
Yaakov and his sons:  
Yaakov's firstborn was Re'uven.
- 9 Re'uven's sons: Hanokh, Pallu, Hetzron, and Carmi.
- 10 Shim'on's sons: Yemuel, Yamin, Ohad, Yakhin, and  
Tzohar, and Sha'ul the son of the Canaanite-woman.
- 11 Levi's sons: Gershon, Kehat, and Merari.
- 12 Yehuda's sons: Er, Onan, Shela, Peretz, and Zerah,  
but Er and Onan had died in the land of Canaan.  
And Peretz's sons were Hetzron and Hamul.
- 13 Yissakhar's sons: Tola, Puvva, Yov, and Shimron.
- 14 Zevulun's sons: Sered, Elon, and Yahl'el.
- 15 These are the sons of Lea, whom she bore to Yaakov in the  
country of Aram, and also Dina his daughter;  
all the persons among his sons and daughters were  
thirty-three.
- 16 Gad's sons: Tzifyon and Chaggi, Shuni and Etzbon, Eri,  
Arodi, and Ar'eli.
- 17 Asher's sons: Yimna, Yishva, Yishvi, and Beria, and Serah  
their sister.  
And Beria's sons: Hever and Malkiel.
- 18 These are the sons of Zilpa, whom Lavan had given to Lea  
his daughter,  
she bore these to Yaakov: sixteen persons.

- 
- 27 **Yosef's words:** In Chapter 37 his words were damaging, but here they are  
life-giving.
- 46:2 **Yaakov! Yaakov!:** Doubled as in 22:11 and other moments of dramatic  
revelations in the Bible (e.g., Ex. 3:4).
- 4 **lay his hand on your eyes:** I.e., be present at your death.
- 8 **Now these are the names . . . :** This phrase opens the book of Exodus,  
making that book a resumption of the Genesis narrative.

- 19 The sons of Rahel, Yaakov's wife: Yosef and Binyamin.  
20 To Yosef there were born in the land of Egypt—whom  
Asenat, daughter of Poti Fera, priest of On, bore to him:  
Menashe and Efrayim.  
21 Binyamin's sons: Bela, Bekher and Ashbel, Gera and  
Naaman, Ahi and Rosh, Muppm, Huppm, and Ard.  
22 These are the sons of Rahel, who were born to Yaakov,  
all the persons were fourteen.  
23 Dan's sons: Hushim.  
24 Naftali's sons: Yahtze'el, Guni, Yetzer, and Shillem.  
25 These are the sons of Bilha, whom Lavan had given to  
Rahel his daughter,  
she bore these to Yaakov: all the persons were seven.  
26 All the persons who came with Yaakov to Egypt, those  
going out from his loins, aside from the wives of Yaakov's  
sons:  
all the persons were sixty-six.  
27 Now Yosef's sons, who had been born to him in Egypt: the  
persons were two.  
(Thus) all the persons of Yaakov's household who came to  
Egypt were seventy.
- 28 Now Yehuda he had sent on ahead of him, to Yosef,  
to give directions ahead of him to Goshen.  
When they came to the region of Goshen,  
29 Yosef had his chariot harnessed and went up to meet Yisrael  
his father, to Goshen.  
When he caught sight of him  
he flung himself upon his neck  
and wept upon his neck continually.  
30 Yisrael said to Yosef:  
Now I can die,  
since I have seen your face, that you are still alive!  
31 Yosef said to his brothers and to his father's household:  
I will go up, so that I may tell Pharaoh and say to him:  
My brothers and my father's household, who were in the  
land of Canaan, have come to me.  
32 The men are shepherds of flocks,

indeed, they have always been livestock men,  
and their sheep and their oxen, all that is theirs, they have  
brought along.

33 Now it will be, when Pharaoh has you called and says:  
What is it that you do?

34 Then say: Your servants have always been livestock men,  
from our youth until now, so we, so our fathers—  
in order that you may settle in the region of Goshen.  
For every shepherd of flocks is an abomination to the  
Egyptians.

47:1 So Yosef came and told Pharaoh, he said:

My father and my brothers, their sheep and their oxen and  
all that is theirs, have come from the land of Canaan,  
and here, they are in the region of Goshen!

2 Now from the circle of his brothers he had picked out five  
men and had set them in Pharaoh's presence.

3 Pharaoh said to his brothers:

What is it that you do?

They said to Pharaoh:

Your servants are shepherds of flocks, so we, so our fathers.

4 And they said to Pharaoh:

It is to sojourn in the land that we have come,  
for there is no grazing for the flocks that are your servants',  
for the famine is heavy in the land of Canaan.

So now,

pray let your servants settle in the region of Goshen!

5 Pharaoh said to Yosef, saying:

(So) your father and your brothers have come to you:

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27 **seventy:** Once again, the "perfect" number.

33 **What is it that you do:** What is your occupation?

34 **every shepherd . . . is an abomination to the Egyptians:** Speiser understands this as a reference to the Hyksos "shepherd kings," who as foreigners ruled Egypt in the mid-Second Millennium (until they were driven out).

47:4 **It is to sojourn:** Are they still sensitive to the accusation in 42:12, "For it is the nakedness of the land that you have come to see"?

- 6 the land of Egypt is before you;  
in the goodliest-part of the land, settle your father and your  
brothers,  
let them settle in the region of Goshen.  
And if you know that there are able men among them,  
make them chiefs of livestock over what is mine.
- 7 Yosef brought Yaakov his father and had him stand in  
Pharaoh's presence.  
And Yaakov gave Pharaoh a blessing-of-greeting.
- 8 Pharaoh said to Yaakov:  
How many are the days and years of your life?
- 9 Yaakov said to Pharaoh:  
The days and years of my sojourn are thirty and a hundred  
years;  
few and ill-fated have been the days and years of my life,  
they have not attained the days and years of my fathers'  
lives in the days of their sojourn.
- 10 Yaakov gave Pharaoh a blessing-of-farewell  
and went out from Pharaoh's presence.
- 11 So Yosef settled his father and his brothers,  
giving them holdings in the land of Egypt,  
in the goodliest-part of the land, in the region of Ra'meses,  
as Pharaoh had commanded.
- 12 Yosef sustained his father, his brothers, and his father's  
entire household with bread, in proportion to the  
little-ones.
- 13 But bread there was none in all the land,  
for the famine was exceedingly heavy,  
and the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan were  
exhausted by the famine.
- 14 Yosef had collected all the silver that was to be found in the  
land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, from the rations  
that they had bought,  
and Yosef had brought the silver into Pharaoh's house.
- 15 When the silver in the land of Egypt and in the land of  
Canaan had run out,  
all the Egyptians came to Yosef, saying:  
Come-now, (let us have) bread!

Why should we die in front of you, because the silver is gone?

16 Yosef said:

Come-now, (let me have) your livestock, and I will give you (bread) for your livestock, since the silver is gone.

17 So they brought their livestock to Yosef, and Yosef gave them bread (in exchange) for the horses, the sheep-livestock, the oxen-livestock, and the asses; he got-them-through with bread (in exchange) for all their livestock in that year.

18 But when that year had run out, they came back to him in the second year and said to him:

We cannot hide from my lord

that if the silver has run out and the animal-stocks are my lord's,

nothing remains for my lord except for our bodies and our soil!

19 Why should we die before your eyes, so we, so our soil?

Acquire us and our soil for bread,

and we and our soil will become servants to Pharaoh.

Give (us) seed-for-sowing

that we may live and not die,

that the soil may not become desolate!

*Yosef the Life-Giver* (47:13–26): The events of this section are not attested historically in Egyptian records. Perhaps they have been included here to confirm Yosef's stature as Rescuer, not only of his family but of all Egypt as well (see note to 42:2). The description of Yosef's power is now complete: just as the brothers were ready to "become my lord's servants" (44:9), so now are the Egyptians (47:25).

Some have seen the episode as an ironic reversal of what is to come in Exodus, with the Egyptians' enslavement of the Israelites; if so, this interlude may have been an amusing one to ancient Israelite audiences.

The text uses the repetition of the phrase "to/for Pharaoh" to effectively paint the legal transaction.

8 **days and years:** See the note to 25:7.

9 **in the days of:** Others use "during."

17 **got-them-through:** Lit. "led them."

- 20 So Yosef acquired all the soil of Egypt for Pharaoh  
—for each of the Egyptians sold his field, for the famine  
was strong upon them—  
and the land went over to Pharaoh.
- 21 As for the people, he transferred them into the cities, from  
one edge of Egypt's border to its other edge.
- 22 Only the soil of the priests he did not acquire,  
for the priests had a prescribed-allocation from Pharaoh,  
and they ate from their allocation which Pharaoh had  
given them,  
therefore they did not sell their soil.
- 23 Yosef said to the people:  
Now that I have acquired you and your soil today for  
Pharaoh,  
here, you have seed, sow the soil!
- 24 But it shall be at the ingatherings, that you shall give a fifth  
to Pharaoh,  
the four other parts being for you  
as seed for the field and for your eating-needs, for those in  
your households, and for feeding your little-ones.
- 25 They said:  
You have saved our lives!  
May we find favor in my lord's eyes: we will become  
servants to Pharaoh.
- 26 And Yosef made it a prescribed-law until this day,  
concerning the soil of Egypt: For Pharaoh every fifth  
part!  
Only the soil of the priests, that alone did not go over to  
Pharaoh.
- 27 Now Yisrael stayed in the land of Egypt, in the region of  
Goshen;  
they obtained holdings in it, bore fruit, and became  
exceedingly many.
- 28 And Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt for seventeen years.  
And the days of Yaakov, the years of his life, were seven  
years and a hundred and forty years.
- 29 Now when Yisrael's days drew near to death,

- he called his son Yosef and said to him:  
 Pray, if I have found favor in your eyes,  
 pray put your hand under my thigh—  
 deal with me faithfully and truly:  
 pray do not bury me in Egypt!
- 30 When I lie down with my fathers,  
 carry me out of Egypt, and bury me in their burial-site!  
 He said:  
 I will do according to your words.
- 31 But he said:  
 Swear to me!  
 So he swore to him.  
 Then Yisrael bowed, at the head of the bed.
- 48:1 Now after these events it was  
 that they said to Yosef:  
 Here, your father has taken sick!  
 So he took his two sons with him, Menashe and  
 Efrayim. . . .
- 2 When they told Yaakov, saying: Here, your son Yosef is  
 coming to you,  
 Yisrael gathered his strength and sat up in the bed.
- 3 Yaakov said to Yosef:  
 God Shaddai was seen by me  
 in Luz, in the land of Canaan;  
 he blessed me
- 

*Yosef's Sons Blessed* (48): Yaakov, near to death, blesses his grandsons (Rahel's!) in moving terms, bringing full circle many of the motifs of his life. Elder and younger sons are switched by the blind Patriarch, this time, though, one who is fully aware of their identities. As in both literature and life, a dying man sees both past (here) and future (the next chapter) with great clarity, as in a vision.

21 **transferred them:** Hebrew difficult; some read “enslaved them.”

24 **a fifth:** Here is the ubiquitous “five” again.

- 4 and he said to me:  
Here, I will make you bear fruit and will make you many,  
and will make you into a host of peoples;  
I will give this land to your seed after you, as a holding for  
the ages!
- 5 So now,  
your two sons who were born to you in the land of Egypt  
before I came to you in Egypt,  
they are mine,  
Efrayim and Menashe,  
like Re'uven and Shim'on, let them be mine!
- 6 But your begotten sons, whom you will beget after them,  
let them be yours;  
by their brothers' names let them be called, respecting their  
inheritance.
- 7 While I—  
when I came back from that country,  
Rahel died on me,  
in the land of Canaan,  
on the way, with still a stretch of land left to come to Efrat.  
There I buried her, on the way to Efrat—that is now  
Bet-Lehem.
- 8 When Yisrael saw Yosef's sons, he said:  
Who are these?
- 9 Yosef said to his father:  
They are my sons, whom God has given me here.  
He said:  
Pray take them over to me, that I may give-them-blessing.
- 10 Now Yisrael's eyes were heavy with age, he was not able to  
see.  
He brought them close to him,  
and he kissed them and embraced them.
- 11 Yisrael said to Yosef:  
I never expected to see your face again,  
and here, God has let me see your seed as well!
- 12 Yosef took them from between his knees  
and they bowed low, their brows to the ground.
- 13 Yosef took the two of them,  
Efrayim with his right-hand, to Yisrael's left,

- and Menashe with his left-hand, to Yisrael's right,  
and brought them close to him.
- 14 But Yisrael stretched out his right-hand and put it on the  
head of Efrayim—yet he was the younger!—  
and his left-hand on the head of Menashe;  
he crossed his arms, although Menashe was the firstborn.
- 15 Then he blessed Yosef and said:  
The God  
in whose presence my fathers walked,  
Avraham and Yitzhak,  
the God  
who has tended me  
ever since I was (born), until this day—
- 16 the messenger  
who has redeemed me from all ill-fortune,  
may he bless the lads!  
May my name continue to be called through them  
and the name of my fathers, Avraham and Yitzhak!  
May they teem-like-fish to (become) many in the midst of  
the land!
- 17 Now when Yosef saw that his father had put his right hand  
on Efrayim's head,  
it sat ill in his eyes,  
and he laid hold of his father's hand, to turn it from  
Efrayim's head to Menashe's head.
- 18 Yosef said to his father:  
Not so, father, indeed, this one is the firstborn, place your  
hand on his head!

---

48:5 **they are mine:** As it were, adopted. **Efrayim and Menashe:** Note how Yaakov reverses the order of birth; see verses 14, 17-19.

7 **Rahel died on me:** The memory is still painful to Yaakov, even after many years.

11 **your face:** The final and most powerful occurrence of the term.

15 **tended:** Or "shepherded."

16 **redeemed me from all ill-fortune:** Despite his words in 47:9, perhaps Yaakov achieves a measure of peace in the end. **my name continue to be called through them:** My line continue through them. **teem-like-fish:** Others use "become teeming (multitudes)."

- 19 But his father refused and said:  
I know, my son, I know—  
he too will be a people, he too will be great,  
yet his younger brother will be greater than he, and his seed  
will become a full measure of nations!
- 20 So he blessed them on that day,  
saying:  
By you shall Israel give-blessings, saying:  
God make you like Efrayim and Menashe!  
Thus he made Efrayim go before Menashe.
- 21 Then Yisrael said to Yosef:  
Here, I am dying,  
but God will be with you,  
he will have you return to the land of your fathers.
- 22 And I, I give you  
one portion over and above your brothers,  
which I took away from the Amorite,  
with my sword, with my bow.
- 49:1 Now Yaakov called his sons and said:  
Gather round, that I may tell you  
what will befall you in the aftertime of days.
- 2 Come together and hearken, sons of Yaakov,  
hearken to Yisrael your father.
- 3 Re'uven,  
my firstborn, you,  
my might, first-fruit of my vigor!  
Surpassing in loftiness, surpassing in force!
- 4 Headlong like water—surpass no more!  
For when you mounted your father's bed,  
then you defiled it—he mounted the couch!
- 5 Shim'on and Levi,  
such brothers,  
wronging weapons are their ties-of-kinship!
- 6 To their council may my being never come,  
in their assembly may my person never unite!  
For in their anger they kill men,  
in their self-will they maim bulls.

- 7 Cursed be their anger, that it is so fierce!  
 Their fury, that it is so harsh!  
 I will split them up in Yaakov,  
 I will scatter them in Yisrael.
- 8 Yehuda,  
 you—your brothers will praise you,  
 your hand on the neck of your enemies!  
 Your father's sons will bow down to you.
- 9 A lion's whelp, Yehuda—  
 from torn-prey, my son, you have gone up!  
 He squats, he crouches,  
 like the lion, like the king-of-beasts,  
 who dares rouse him up?
- 

*Yaakov's Testament and Death* (49): In this ancient piece of poetry, Yaakov addresses his sons, not as they are, but as they will be. There is little resemblance, for instance, between the Binyamin as the beloved and protected youngest son of the Yosef story and the preying wolf of verse 27, but the Benjaminites were later to be known for their military skills. Scholars have therefore seen the entire poem as a retrojection of Israel as it came to be on the days of the Patriarchs.

As in the fuller Yosef narrative, the first three sons are quickly disqualified from active leadership, paving the way for the rise of Yehuda (the tribe from which sprang David and the royal house of Israel). Despite this, Yosef still receives the richest blessing.

The chapter is textually among the most difficult in the Torah. Many passages are simply obscure, leaving the translator to make at best educated guesses.

- 19 **I know:** Though blind, Yaakov knows exactly what he is doing, unlike his father in Chapter 27.
- 22 **one portion over and above:** Hebrew unclear. We do not know to what event Yaakov is referring in this entire verse. **took away:** Others use “will take,” “must take.”
- 49:4 **when you mounted . . . :** Alluding to 35:21–22.
- 5 **ties-of-kinship:** Hebrew obscure. Others use “weapons,” “swords” (B-R uses “mattocks”).
- 6 **in their anger they kill men:** See 34:25–26.
- 8 **Yehuda . . . enemies:** Heb. *yehuda/ atta yodukha ahikha/ yadekha al oref oyevekha*.
- 9 **lion:** Eventually the symbol of the (Judahite) monarchy.

- 10       The scepter shall not depart from Yehuda,  
          nor the staff-of-command from between his legs,  
          until they bring him tribute,  
          —the obedience of peoples is his.
- 11       He ties up his foal to a vine,  
          his young colt to a crimson tendril;  
          he washes his raiment in wine,  
          his mantle in the blood of grapes;
- 12       his eyes, darker than wine,  
          his teeth, whiter than milk.
- 13       Zevulun,  
          on the shore of the sea he dwells;  
          he is a haven-shore for boats,  
          his flank upon Tzidon.
- 14       Yissakhar,  
          a bone-strong ass,  
          crouching among the fire-places.
- 15       When he saw how good the resting-place was,  
          and how pleasant was the land,  
          he bent his shoulder to bearing  
          and so became a laboring serf.
- 16       Dan,  
          his people will mete-out-judgment,  
          (to all) of Israel's branches together.
- 17       May Dan be a snake on the wayside,  
          a horned-viper on the path,  
          who bites the horse's heels  
          so that his rider tumbles backward.
- 18       I wait-in-hope for your salvation, O YHWH!
- 19       Gad,  
          goadng robber-band will goad him,  
          yet he will goad at their heel.
- 20       Asher,  
          his nourishment is rich,

he gives forth king's dainties.

- 21 Naftali,  
a hind let loose,  
he who gives forth lovely fawns.
- 22 Young wild-ass,  
Yosef,  
young wild-ass along a spring,  
donkeys along a wall.
- 23 Bitterly they shot at him,  
the archers assailed him,
- 24 yet firm remained his bow,  
and agile stayed his arms and hands—  
by means of the hands of Yaakov's Champion,  
up there,  
the Shepherd, the Stone of Yisrael.
- 25 By your father's God—  
may he help you,  
and Shaddai,  
may he give-you-blessing:  
Blessings of the heavens, from above,  
blessings of Ocean crouching below,  
blessings of breasts and womb!

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10 **until they bring . . .** : Hebrew difficult; others use "until Shiloh comes."  
The phrase is an old and unsolved problem for interpreter and translator alike.

11 **colt**: Of an ass.

15 **laboring serf**: The Hebrew *mas 'oved* denotes forced labor.

16 **mete-out-judgment**: Others use "will endure."

18 **I wait-in-hope . . .** : Either a deathbed cry or possibly the cry of a falling rider (see the preceding line) (Ehrlich).

19 **goad**: Lit. "attack"; a play on "Gad" (Heb. *gad gedud yegudennu*).

24 **arms and hands**: Lit. "arms of his hands."

25 **Shaddai**: Once again connected to fertility (note the content of the following lines). **give-you-blessing**: Just as Yaakov had blessed Yosef's sons, so Yosef is the only one of the twelve brothers to whom Yaakov applies the term.

- 26        May the blessings of your father transcend  
            the blessings of mountains eternal,  
            the bounds of hills without age.  
            May they fall upon the head of Yosef,  
            on the crown of the one-set-apart among his brothers.
- 27        Binyamin,  
            a wolf that tears-to-pieces!  
            In the morning he devours prey,  
            and then, in the evening, divides up the spoil.
- 28        All these are the tribes of Israel, twelve,  
            and this is what their father spoke to them;  
            he blessed them,  
            according to what belonged to each as blessing, he blessed  
            them.
- 29        And he charged them, saying to them:  
            I am now about to be gathered to my kinspeople;  
            bury me by my fathers,  
            in the cave that is in the field of Efron the Hittite,  
30        at the cave that is in the field of Makhpela, that faces  
            Mamre, in the land of Canaan.  
            —Avraham had acquired that field from Efron the Hittite,  
            as a burial holding.
- 31        There they buried Avraham and Sara his wife,  
            there they buried Yitzhak and Rivka his wife,  
            there I buried Lea—
- 32        an acquisition, the field and the cave that is in it, from the  
            Sons of Het.
- 33        When Yaakov had finished charging his sons,  
            he gathered up his feet onto the bed and breathed-his-last,  
            and was gathered to his kinspeople.
- 50:1     Yosef flung himself on his father's face,  
            he wept over him and kissed him.
- 2        Then Yosef charged his servants, the physicians, to embalm  
            his father,  
            and the physicians embalmed Yisrael.

- 3 A full forty days were required for him,  
for thus are fulfilled the days of embalming.  
And the Egyptians wept for him for seventy days.
- 4 Now when the days of weeping for him had passed,  
Yosef spoke to Pharaoh's household, saying:  
Pray, if I have found favor in your eyes,  
pray speak in the ears of Pharaoh, saying:
- 5 My father had me swear, saying:  
Here, I am dying—  
in my burial-site which I dug for myself in the land of  
Canaan,  
there you are to bury me!  
So now,  
pray let me go up, bury my father, and return.
- 6 Pharaoh said:  
Go up and bury your father, as he had you swear.
- 7 So Yosef went up to bury his father;  
and with him went up all of Pharaoh's servants,  
the elders of his household and all the elders of the land of  
Egypt,

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*Yaakov's Burial* (50:1–14): The funeral of Yaakov seems to presage the Exodus from Egypt—here with Pharaoh's permission and a large royal escort (including “chariots and horsemen,” who in several generations will pursue Yaakov's descendants into the sea).

Interestingly, the *Iliad* also ends with an elaborate burial scene. The contrast is instructive: the Homeric epic celebrates the deeds and mourns the lost youth of a hero (Hector); Genesis reflects Yosef's standing at court and the desire to bury Yaakov in the land of Canaan, in the family plot. Note too that Genesis has two more scenes, tending to lessen the impact of this impressive funeral sequence.

- 26 **mountains:** Reading *hararei* for the traditional Hebrew *horei*, “parents” on the basis of Hab. 3:6.
- 28 **tribes:** Heb. *shevatim*, “staffs,” which symbolized the tribes.
- 31 **Lea:** Not called “my wife.” Again the old feelings remain vivid.
- 33 **breathed-his-last:** Omitted are the “old and abundant in days” that were applied to his father and grandfather.

- 8 all of Yosef's household,  
his brothers and his father's household.  
Only their little-ones, their sheep, and their oxen did they  
leave behind in the region of Goshen.
- 9 And along with him went up chariots as well, and horsemen  
as well—  
the company was an exceedingly heavy one.
- 10 They came as far as Goren Ha-Atad/Bramble  
Threshing-Floor, which is across the Jordan,  
and there they took up lament, an exceedingly great and  
heavy lament,  
and he held mourning for his father, for seven days.
- 11 Now when the settled-folk of the land, the Canaanites, saw  
the mourning at Bramble Threshing-Floor,  
they said:  
This is such a heavy mourning/*evel* for Egypt!  
Therefore its name was called: Meadow/*avel* of Egypt,  
which is across the Jordan.
- 12 So his sons did thus for him, as he had charged them:
- 13 his sons carried him back to the land of Canaan  
and buried him in the cave in the field of Makhpela.  
—Avraham had acquired that field as a burial holding from  
Efron the Hittite, (the field) facing Mamre.
- 14 Then Yosef returned to Egypt,  
he and his brothers and all who had gone up with him to  
bury his father,  
after he had buried his father.
- 15 When Yosef's brothers saw that their father was dead, they  
said:  
What if Yosef holds a grudge against us  
and repays, yes, repays us for all the ill that we caused him!
- 16 So they charged Yosef, saying:  
Your father left-this-charge before his death, saying:
- 17 Say thus to Yosef:  
Ah, pray forgive your brothers' offense and their sin, that  
they caused you ill!  
Now, pray forgive the offense of the servants of your  
father's God!  
Yosef wept as they spoke to him.

- 18 And his brothers themselves came, they flung themselves  
down before him and said:  
Here we are, servants to you!
- 19 But Yosef said to them:  
Do not be afraid! For am I in place of God?
- 20 Now you, you planned ill against me,  
(but) God planned-it-over for good,  
in order to do (as is) this very day—  
to keep many people alive.
- 21 So now, do not be afraid!  
I myself will sustain you and your little-ones!  
And he comforted them and spoke to their hearts.
- 22 So Yosef stayed in Egypt, he and his father's household.  
Yosef lived a hundred and ten years;
- 

*The End of the Matter* (50:15–26): Drawing out the tension inherent in the Patriarchs' family relationships to the very end, the text repeats an earlier situation in Yaakov's life—his brother's feelings of "grudge" and threats to kill him—in the guise of his sons' fears toward Yosef. Here, however, there can be no question of personal vengeance, since Yosef sees the brothers' betrayal of him as but part of a larger purpose. In his words of verse 20, "God planned-it-over for good . . . to keep many people alive," the text resolves two of the great hanging issues that have persisted throughout Genesis: sibling hatred and the threat to generational continuity.

Left hanging, of course, is the issue of the promised land, since the narrative concludes "in Egypt," but these final chapters lead to the assurance that God will "take account" (vv.24–25) of the Sons of Israel, as they are soon to be termed.

50:9 **heavy**: Three times through verse 11. The root *kbd* connotes "honor," "importance," "weight," and is central here perhaps to emphasize the respect shown to Yaakov.

13 **the cave in the field of Makhpela**: Despite God's continual promise of the land throughout the book, this is practically all that the Patriarchs possess at the end of Genesis.

16 **left-this-charge**: Or "commanded."

22 **a hundred and ten years**: The ideal Egyptian life span.

- 23 Yosef saw from Efrayim sons of the third generation,  
and also the sons of Makhir son of Menashe were born on  
Yosef's knees.
- 24 Yosef said to his brothers:  
I am dying,  
but God will take account, yes, account of you,  
he will bring you up from this land  
to the land about which he swore  
to Avraham, to Yitzhak, and to Yaakov.
- 25 Yosef had the Sons of Israel swear, saying:  
When God takes account, yes, account of you,  
bring my bones up from here!
- 26 And Yosef died, a hundred and ten years old.  
They embalmed him and they put him in a coffin  
in Egypt.

נשלם ספר בראשית  
ברוך המחיה והממותת

- 23 **born on Yosef's knees:** Considered his own; see 30:3.  
24 **brothers:** Presumably meant in the sense of "family."  
25 **Sons of Israel:** They are no longer merely the sons of one man but are now  
on their way to becoming a people.



# SUGGESTIONS

## FOR FURTHER READING

This list cites selected works in English only. It is intended to supplement *In the Beginning* with reference to the text of Genesis, ancient Near Eastern background, and a literary approach to the Bible. Included also is material referred to in the Commentary and Notes under authors' names in parentheses.

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can be read aloud with the oral force inherent in the text itself. Fox's commentary alerts the reader to the ways the language of the text underscores its dominant motifs.

The Bible, Buber and Rosenzweig perceived, communicates not only through semantics but also through sound, as speech transmits sense through tone of voice. *In the Beginning* brings the English speaking reader one step closer to the Hebrew Bible as it was meant to be heard—as an oral document continually addressing its listeners.

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